

Harry Potter and the Key to Summer

Chapter One.

Those Who Sacrifice Liberty For Security Deserve Neither.
-variant, Benjamin Franklin

Harry Potter, supposed savior of the Wizarding world, stood and came back to himself as the sound of locks catching on his door echoed in the smallest bedroom of number 4 Privet Drive. Shaking off his melancholy, the young man went about the business of putting his school items away, tending to Hedwig's cage and comfort, and plying some small order to the chaos of his life. "Here girl," offering Hedwig a few of the smaller treats he'd stowed in a pocket during the trip back, Harry helped settle his longtime companion and confidant. Watching as she delicately ate the small tidbits, the Boy-Who-Lived smiled, his mind distracted from the darkness that seemed intent on taking him so recently.

Rousing himself from his reverie, Harry took stock. First on his list, was to hide anything important to him, that need not come under the intolerant gaze of his warders – the Dursleys. He couldn't think of them as family, not after the years he'd spent around the Weasleys. He'd not had any reference most of his life in what really constituted a family, but with their glowing memory in mind, he could not in good conscience use the word for what he Aunt and Uncle were. A single glance at his bedroom door reinforced this ideal, with it's cat-flap to allow meals, and the checkered light from the hallway, cast between the many locks.

Second, Harry took stock of his room, to see if anything had changed over his school year. Seeing only a larger collection of dust and debris from long neglect, he had to assume not. Checking his loose floorboard, Harry stowed what small precious items he could there; any snacks and food he had left, his Defense against the Dark Arts notes and textbook, as well as the photo album, his gossamer invisibility cloak, and a bundle he gingerly transported from his trunk. With a moment's hesitation, he slipped his wand back into the waistband of his trousers, pulling the oversize shirt he wore to conceal it. Snickering a bit at the look he'd likely get from Moody for

such, he none the less had no better way to keep it on hand. Satisfied that his more treasured items were safe, Harry sat upon his small cot, not really a bed, and looked out of the window, still barred, across from his bed. He knew the street was below, but at the angle he couldn't see. Frowning, he looked for his curtains, but found none. Sighing heavily, he set about taking another of his school robes, this one from third year, and tearing it into makeshift curtains. Without them, he'd never get to sleep with the streetlight shining into his room each night.

Thinking about sleep caused a shudder to go through the young man, as he gazed blankly out at the steel-gray sky above Surrey. His appearance spoke of his trouble with sleep, deep rings under his eyes, and a sunken, weary cast to his otherwise handsome features. Shaking off the moment's darkness, he opened a small box that he'd kept separate from those things to be stowed under the floor.

Hedwig made small curious sound, as he set the few items from the box on his desk. The somewhat battered Pocket Sneakoscope was put back in with a sigh, as the thing sat and wobbled precariously, nearly upending itself onto the floor. "So much for that," he mused. How anyone could use one of those was beyond him, and that the poor thing worked at all after all the time Harry had owned it was a wonder.

Next out, with a smile lighting his face, was a small scale model of his own Firebolt, given to him the previous Christmas by Tonks. Setting the small stand near his desk lamp, he watched with a light heart as the miniature broom lifted off and circled the light a few minutes, until going back to recharge it's charm. Harry knew such a thing was risky to keep out, but with his own broom locked away at Hogwarts, and the reassurance that there was a repairing charm on the bauble, he figured it a safe allowance.

Harry's smile faded as his next find came into the light from his lamp. His Pocketknife, from Sirius glinted faintly in his hand, the one missing blade a reminder of that night, as if the thing itself needed more impact. Closing his eyes, Harry relived that Christmas, remembering the strained happiness he'd shared with the Order, his friends and their families. Sniffing hard, he banished those thoughts

and laid the knife down, warily eyeing it. "Sirius would want me to keep on my person..." he mumbled quietly, and with a small nod, slipped it back into his pocket.

Finished with his unpacking, Harry slumped onto his cot, and listened to the various goings-on of his warders. Despite the day not nearly being done, he found himself more weary than wakeful, and with a nervous sigh, settled himself to sleep.

Above, perched on the rooftop of number 4 Privet Drive, a lone watcher sat and contemplated many things. The young man that was guarded, and veritably jailed, below. The ultimate reason for his sequestering. The man who could have changed all, but for some foresight and the strength of will to do what was right, rather than do what was good. Lastly, the figure contemplated itself. The warp and weft of the tapestry they were a part of, and how the many, many possible changes in a single thread's direction could alter it all. Nodding once, the figure pulled it's hood forward, and a book from the folds of it's cloak.

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Harry came aware with a start, his breath leaping in great gasps. Shaking his aching head, the young man stole a glance around his room, only to settle with a groan back into his pillow. "Dream. Just a dream," he murmured, blurry eyes turned to the luminous disks, Hedwig's eyes, watching him from his desk. "Want to go for a hunt girl?"

Hedwig seemed to puff up at this, her pinfeathers flexing out in anticipation. "Take that as a yes. Come back by midday, I have some letters to write, ok?" Satisfied that she knew his meaning, Harry took the great owl and let her free into the still deep night. Wondering himself what time it was, he looked about and remembered he didn't own a clock of his own, for the room. Shuffling quietly through his trunk, he came upon an old wristwatch, and realized that it was likely wrong. Running a hand through his unruly hair, Harry tried to find

some good in the present, scratching idly at the impression his Godfather's gift had left in his hip.

Blinking, Harry laughed at himself and pulled the knife free. "So simple," he murmured, eyeing his door with a widening grin. Fifteen minutes later found Harry outside, laying under the stars in the back garden, his father's cloak stretched out beneath him along the ground. He watched the dome of sky turn over him, wondering if somewhere there was a place for those lost. His parents. Sirius. Luna's mother. His thoughts swept over those he knew, and Harry realized that his pain wasn't unique – far from it. Many had lost much to Voldemort. Many had suffered worse fates than a simple death, he recalled, thinking sadly on Neville's parents.

Rousing himself after nearly an hour of stargazing, Harry turned and looked over his home. His rather heated talk with Dumbledore had left no question that he was under guard of the Order. Remembering that Tonk, Moody, Shacklebolt and a few other notable members were Aurors, he had to assume they'd be concealed well. Leaning against one of the trees in the back garden, he took in the property quietly. Remembering his few lessons from Hagrid involving the behavior of wild things around humans, Harry had to assume whoever it was, used magic or were very good at hiding themselves. Smirking a bit, he shook his head. "Like I am one to judge someone on their stealth," he murmured to himself.

"Oh I don't know," a voice chimed up in response, causing Harry to start and fall to the side, his arm tangled in the mat of a cloak he lay on. "Seem to do alright for yourself, mostly."

The voice resolved itself to a gray-cloaked figure, crouched attentively on the bench a few feet from Harry. His wand was in his hand, he knew not when he drew it, but as he watched the figure made a great show of it's empty hands, reaching up slowly to draw back the obscuring hood. He released a tense breath as shock-pink hair was revealed, over a pale face. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Tonks," Harry sighed, closing his eyes and trying to reign in his galloping heart. "Why'd you go and scare me like that? I could have hexed you, then where'd we be?"

The young Auror laughed, shaking her head slowly, "Oh, likely in Hopkirk's office, as it seems she's now in charge of anything pear-shaped that happens around you." Scooting to the side, she patted the bench beside her, motioning Harry to join her. "Come along then, off the ground. Going to make a mess of that fine cloak."

Grudgingly, Harry sat on the far corner, keeping the woman in the corner of his eye. He'd remember seeing her the day before, it being some time after midnight, as a small group from the Order had approached and spoken with his Uncle briefly. Unsure what was said, he thought to ask, but was pulled off soon after by the same. "Tonks, what happened on the landing, in King's Cross?"

Looking to him a moment, she seemed to find something interesting on the ground before the bench. Settling out of her crouch, she sat with a sigh and looked to the Boy-Who-Lived. "We warned them, to be civil this summer."

Face mirroring the incredulousness he felt, Harry took a few calming breaths before he could speak, his voice barely reflecting his outrage. "It wasn't your place. Things here aren't like with the Order. Dumbledore isn't here."

"What do you mean?"

Harry shook his head, sighing as he stood. The chill from the night was uncomfortable, and he didn't really fancy speaking to anyone of the Order, in all truth. "He's been aware of it all. Why would he let you change anything? I hope he doesn't find out about what you said." Without anything more of an explanation, he pulled his cloak about him and disappeared. Tonks watched, her mouth open in shock as the young man vanished, the back door to his home opening some small time later.

"What did he mean by that?" she murmured to the night. Fetching her Cleansweep 260 from her robes where it had been shrunk, she restored and pulled up her own cloak, Disillusioning the broom and herself before making her way back to the house's roof. It was nearly morning before the figure sent a message spell to whoever had

breached the wards, receiving one in response. Drifting down to the back garden, she pulled alongside a faint impression of feet in the grass and caught the distinct smell of alcohol. "Dung, you're not sober. Fix it and get to watch," she hissed, barely concealing her distaste for the drunkard.

"I see you're still in a lurch, Miss Tonks. Carry on, I'm here now," with a huff and a hint of green pipe smoke, Tonks assumed Fletcher to be settling in on the bench for his watch. Grousing at his comments, she sped out to the lane, beyond the wards and Disapparated with a crack. She arrived at the 'safe point' in Grimmauld, one of the emptied pantries off the kitchen proper. She waited for the wards to let her be, seemingly stuck in a limbo of sorts till she felt gravity again and stumbled out, nearly barreling into Molly.

"Wotcher, Molly, let me help with that..." tucking an arm around the matronly Weasley, she assisted in getting a large platter of eggs and sausages settled on the table, where she'd nearly upset them by her somewhat less than graceful arrival.

Molly Weasley looked harried. She seemed to carry herself in such a way as well, and from what Tonks remembered, most of her interactions with those nearby seemed to suffer it in equal parts. "Gracious Tonk, what are you doing, jumping out of the pantry like that? Give someone a start," shaking her head, the woman continued her trip back to the cooker, retrieving more of the breakfast Tonks had to assume she was making for an early Order meeting.

Checking up on the wards herself, Tonks found Remus, Bill Weasley, Ron, Ginny and Hermione, and Elphias Doge. Figuring that would explain the late breakfast, Tonks hurried out of the woman's way, into the sitting room and a couch. Slumping out of sight of anyone, the young Auror yawned, and checked her wand for the time.

"Eight in the bloody morning," she mumbled, turning to wave at the gasp from the stairs. "Pardon, sorry."

Hermione padded around the couch, eyebrow raised at the curse the Auror had muttered. "Good morning Tonks. Were you on watch last night?"

Nodding, Tonks tried to pull her robes about and get comfortable, but discarded the idea almost immediately. She had today off, but needed to catch up on a proper stretch of sleep, rather than a fast nap on a couch. She'd just righted herself and was about to head for the fireplace when Hermione caught her by the arm, face showing her worry.

"How is he?" Biting her lip, the young Gryffindor stepped back, realizing her forward behavior and looking abashed. Tonks smiled, but gave nothing away, waving slightly.

"Orders, Ms. Granger. We're not to speak to him. Could cause problems with his family, or reveal the guards and his position." Smiling apologetically, she took a handful of floo powder, and spoke her goal quietly. "You may want to owl him though," she called in parting, as she sped to her own flat, seeking sleep and avoiding curious students.

Hermione sighed, hoping for at least some word on how Harry was managing after losing Sirius recently. Tonks made a point though, and with a letter already forming in her mind, she set off to find Ron's owl.

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Harry woke, feeling less rested than he expected, but at least this time not from nightmares. He'd tried to sleep off the annoyance he felt toward Tonks and the Order, but soon gave in to his own nature, and forgave them. The few of the Order to approach his warders had only done so to try and better his situation. Just because they didn't know how things truly were, only spoke further of Dumbledore's duplicity. Harry expected him to have kept some things from his own vigilante force, but didn't expect him to have the loyalty of so many, with so little to work from.

Sighing, he pulled out one of his precious few blank notebooks, a kindness from Hermione, and set to work organizing his thoughts.

He'd felt the need for this after losing Sirius, and realizing that if he let his mind continue in its downward spiral, there would be nothing left to fight with.

He had to win. Losing, even in small ways, only managed to strengthen Voldemort. So decided, he had begun the path to mending his broken mind, and heart.

I can't really fault Tonks for what she did, he wrote, penning his thoughts so he could reread them, as he'd come upon them. He found it centering to look over his own reasonings later, and often used previous decisions to make new ones. The Order must be working on some thin information, or blind loyalty if things are as they stand.

Dumbledore finally came out and said it. Gave me everything I needed. The Prophecy is etched in my mind now, but what does it mean? "And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..." Hand? Haven't I done that once, with Quirrell? Harry shook his head and sighed. Could mean anything. A spell. An order to kill... Kill. No matter if it's Voldemort, I still have to kill him. I'll be a murderer at the end of this. If I survive. Harry mulled on this a moment, before slamming his book closed and throwing himself back on his cot. "He killed them because of me. Because of that damn Prophecy. It doesn't even say I will kill him – only that I have 'the power to'." The young man scrubbed his hands through unruly hair, upsetting it further. "Bloody Prophecies, bloody Dark Lords, and bloody damned Headmasters!"

"Boy! Be quiet!" Vernon's voice echoed about the house, reminding Harry that he was still in his prison, his personal Azkaban.

"Sirius, I come closer to understanding you by the day," he murmured, getting up to lean on the windowsill that overlooked the front garden. Doing so reminded him of last night's meeting with Tonks again, and he realized that the small time conversing was something he should not have taken for granted. Grimacing a bit at the memory, he realized it was likely the first and last time he'd get the opportunity to do so. "She won't likely talk to me again after that... and I doubt any of my other minders will break cover. Bloody hell."

Harry spent the rest of his day watching, and waiting. He didn't know for what, really till something caught his eye, in the front yard. Squinting, he picked out the faint depressions of footprints, slowly making their way around the house. Peering about the neighborhood, he saw no one paying attention, so he leaned out the window a bit, after climbing up onto his dresser.

Sure enough, the better angle let him see the footprints clearly, as well as catch the small puff of green smoke he had to assume was from Mundungus Fletcher's pipe. "So, he's on shift now," Harry pondered, shuffling off his dresser and picking up the notebook he'd just moments before tossed away.

July 1st, 9 AM – Fletcher

Harry scribed a set of rules down the page, allowing him to document days and times. He figured like most other places that worked on shifts, his guard would cycle on an eight hour system. Smiling to himself, he set about his Defense and Transfiguration books, recapping his studies from last year.

A few hours into the day, the cat flap to his room shifted and Harry noted some cold soup and crackers, likely stale, with a glass of water in a dingy cup sitting by his door. Wrinkling his nose yet hungry, he took up the tray with a polite word of thanks, said to his Aunt he supposed on the other side of the door. Eating quickly, he also shared some of the crackers and water with Hedwig, who found them nearly as distasteful as he did. After he'd let his tray be taken, he went back to his Transfiguration work, deciding that he could do with a bit more understanding of the theory involved. Secretly, even to his own logic, the reason behind his interest was the hope that perhaps he could someday assume an Animagus form like his father. Not wanting to delve too far in that hope, he kept it secreted away, hidden deep.

It was nearly five o'clock, when a bleary eyed Harry Potter put away the book and his notes, having spent a good half that time transcribing diagrams involving the flow of magical energy when transfiguring a living thing. Figuring it was just a few steps from his

own goal, he wanted to understand it completely, so borrowing a page from Hermione, Harry took extensive notes. Flipping to the back of his notebook, Harry noted it was past the assumed shift change time, and peered about the front lawn for any signs of his guard. Seeing none, he frowned, and gave it another hard look, this time leaning up on the sill again, trying to use that to give him a better vantage. Still, nothing presented itself as a guard or a hint that one was there.

Settling back on his cot, Harry tried to think of some way to determine who his guard was. He knew the reason he was doing this, apologizing to Tonks, was possibly of minor importance, but the mental exercise was invigorating compared to his usual summer activities. "How to get a guard to reveal themselves," he pondered, watching Hedwig as she ate the last few crumbs of a cracker. With a slow grin, Harry decided on a course and collected the items he'd need.

A few minutes later, he was was climbing out of his window, invisibility cloak on and a robe beneath. As he hit the grass he knew whoever was watching him would likely have heard, and so he set off at a brisk pace down Privet, toward Magnolia. He made it to the corner of the street when a firm hand found his shoulder, pulling him to a stop.

"Afternoon Harry, have a moment to speak with me?" the basso voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt rumbled behind him. Smiling before he turned, Harry nodded and moved toward the curb, looking about to make sure it was fairly deserted.

"Afternoon Mr. Shacklebolt, how are things at the Order going?" Harry asked, trying to paste a somewhat depressed tone and expression on his face. He knew if he seemed happy that the older Auror had stopped him, it'd send up flags for the man, so he tried to keep his more morose face forward. Summoning images of Sirius and the fight at the Department of Mysteries, he managed well.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stared at his afternoon's charge with a sense of worry. Harry had snuck out of his Aunt and Uncle's home without much stealth, something the young man had done excellently up till

this last incident. Kingsley felt it was likely due to his recent loss, clouding his mind and usual habits. Sympathy for Harry took the fore, pairing with his worry and guiding his words, "Things are going forward. The Ministry is taking more action now, but things are going slowly, we have all of Fudge's mistakes and paper trails to work over first." Smiling, the tall Auror looked out at the lane Harry was going to be traveling. "Any reason for the sudden outing?"

Harry shrugged, sighing expansively. "I guess I just wanted out a while. It's rather boring being locked up in there, and I could do with some sun and a bit of a walk."

"Locked up... you mean figuratively of course?" Kingsley's eyes narrowed as he watched Harry's reaction to this carefully. He'd heard some rather disturbing things, but didn't know first hand, as he was never really allowed much time to speak with his school-age friend's son. Harry's hesitation and sudden preoccupation with his feet were answer enough. "I see."

"It's really OK. I'm let out to the loo and for showers..." wincing at the Aurors heavy glare, Harry knew this wasn't the best subject. Sure, he'd love if the Dursleys changed, but forcing them to do so wouldn't fix anything. He'd felt Vernon's rage at being backed into a corner by the Order on the way home, and knew the more they came in contact with the intolerant man, the more likely he would be to go spare and get outright violent.

Kingsley sighed and smiled for Harry's benefit. "Alright then. If you say so. So, where were you planning on going?"

"Just around the block a bit, maybe to the park I used to go to, last summer. Good place to sit and think," Harry amended, looking wistfully down the lane. He really did like going there, it was a nice place to just sit and be. Plus, it'd give him the chance to maybe get in some running, maybe a bit of sunshine. Even he had to admit being locked away like he was, wasn't healthy.

The Auror nodded, looking thoughtful. "On Tuesdays, I'm your afternoon guard, and your morning one on Thursdays; we'll worry about those later. Say around... four to five o'clock in the afternoon, if

you slip out how you did today, I might be on my rounds, and be able to keep an eye on you, while doing them. They do round the park after all, and if you happen to be there while I'm nearby, well, no reason I can't watch you there, is there?" Smiling, he rested a hand on Harry's shoulder.

For his part, Harry was ecstatic. He never planned on this gambit getting him a regular time to go and stretch his legs. "Sure thing, Mr. Shacklebolt," he nodded vigorously, as the Auror laughed quietly.

"Call me Kingsley, or Shack. Either work."

"Alright then, Kingsley it is," with a smile, Harry decided that he more than made up for his lack of knowledge for today, and with a few words, the two made their way back to number 4 Privet. Kingsley helped Harry back to his room by Apparating him there, something new to Harry as he'd never been allowed to practice or try himself. The feeling was odd, but unlike Portkeys. He decided to ask someone about it soon, if he could. Settling back into his room, and making sure he was alone, Harry took out his notebook and added notes to his plan, revising it somewhat.

Monday: AM shift – unknown, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – Tonks?

Tuesday: AM shift – Fletcher, PM shift – Shacklebolt, Night shift – unknown

Wednesday: AM shift – unknown, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – unknown

Thursdays, AM shift – Shacklebolt, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – unknown

Friday: AM shift – unknown, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – unknown

Saturday: AM shift – unknown, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – unknown

Sunday: AM shift – unknown, PM shift – unknown, Night shift – unknown

Content his plan was working out well, Harry spent the remainder of his day going over his Transfiguration notes. He figured having the theory he had down to memory would only help in the long run.

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The week progressed, and through innocent 'accidents' and obvious means and observation, Harry had completed the schedule for his guard. He also found that the spying on the spies gave him some relative amusement. The change in pace from his usual boring summers was welcome. By the end of the week, he had the rough schedule planned, and though he knew there were to be changes occasionally, he also knew the guards well enough by the few times he'd observed them, to know which was which. He also managed, with a little guesswork, math and a hint or two, to figure out when the shifts started and ended. Overall, it was a very efficient system, allowing his guards days at a time to recoup what could be a long day or sleepless night as they had not only their normal lives, but those as his guard to maintain.

Harry also realized not everyone in the Order took part in his guard. The fact Lupin and Snape were absent made him wonder: worriedly in the former, cynically in the latter's case. He was concerned at why Dumbledore wouldn't let Lupin come guard him, when it was obvious, to Harry at least, he was most able to defend him. After all, none of the others had been Defense professors.

Looking over his list, he made sure there was room for the occasional revision. Chewing on the end of a pencil, he thought to use a calendar, but discarded the idea – if someone from the Order noticed it, then his plans would be for nothing. Smiling a bit, Harry realized his initial plan, to apologize to Tonks, had changed since taking on this project.

Shifts run: 7am – 3pm(AM), 3pm – 11pm(PM), 11pm – 7am(Night)

Monday: AM shift – Jones, PM shift – Podmore, Night shift – Tonks

Tuesday: AM shift – Fletcher, PM shift – Shacklebolt, Night shift – Moody

Wednesday: AM shift – Tonks, PM shift – Fletcher, Night shift – Vance

Thursdays, AM shift – Shacklebolt, PM shift – Diggle, Night shift – Moody

Friday: AM shift – Tonks, PM shift – Tonks, Night shift – Podmore

Saturday: AM shift – McGonagall, PM shift – Doge, Night shift – Diggle

Sunday: AM shift – McGonagall, PM shift – Vance, Night shift – Moody

Satisfied that his main outline was sound, Harry made some notes, and decided that the next Monday would be best. Smiling, he rechecked his trunk, his box and the floorboards, and settled down to study his Defense texts, making notes of the way spells were cast, and the kinds of shielding that worked to counter some curses.

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Time moved quickly for Harry, as he spent most of it if not studying his texts, then studying his guards. What other time he had, he used to write to his friends, when they seemed amicable... recently things between himself and Ginny had seemed strained. He felt a fondness for her still, but the intensity of it had dulled over the summer break. It had only been a few weeks, three to be exact, this Sunday, but he couldn't really explain it any other way. The first time he'd noticed there was a dimming of his feelings, was after Hedwig had upset one of his packages and some of the charmed food he'd received from the Weasleys had been fouled, as it all resumed their normal sizes unexpectedly. The butterbeer had been smashed, and it was a near thing that he managed to hide the mess and noise and not be the recipient of a severe episode of his Uncle's wrath. What seemed to catch his attention though was the smell... the butterbeer normally had a butterscotch aroma, with a bit of tartness. But this batch had smelled different. It had aromas of wood polish, treacle tart, and something flowery, perhaps lilies. Pondering this, he subjected the other batches to the same test; smelling them before drinking. Sure enough, they all seemed to carry the same aromas. Not wanting to offend Ginny, he never mentioned it, but discarded them all the same, figuring they may have gone a bit sour. The food seemed spot on

though, and he devoured what he could, saving what was extra for those long stretches where letters didn't seem forthcoming.

Hermione was her usually inquisitive and bossy self, but the news he was studying was a star in his corner to her. It seemed to appease the bookish girl, and more often than not, their letters were about her and Ron's seemingly stumbling path toward a relationship. In one letter, he'd actually come out and asked her why Ron, and the response had made more sense than he'd expected.

Hermione it turned out, simply wanted a large family. Growing up an only child had been a lonely thing for her, and she blamed her bookish tendencies, not that anything was wrong with them she firmly stated, on her lack of friends growing up. Harry had to admit, the Weasley family would definitely keep any children they had in a definite state of company. Smiling, he replied that he hoped them the best, and would be there for them. He often used this line of conversation to distract from her inquiries on how he was handling Sirius's death.

He was always wary when one of his friends asked him about that. To be honest, he had to admit he wasn't being healthy about it, at all. He never let it come to his mind, outside of nightmares, and those he kept at bay by avoiding sleep till he simply passed out from exhaustion.

Harry had found an exhausted mind didn't dream nearly as much.

The other problem he had dealing with his Godfather's death, was the lack of closure. He did feel responsible, but he also knew Bellatrix was the ultimate issue there. If she'd not fired the spell that sent him through the veil, he'd still be here. Or perhaps, not. The battle was fierce, and there was a better than passing chance, after it all that even had Sirius been alive, he'd have been captured by the Ministry or killed by either the Death Eaters or Voldemort to get to him psychologically. He knew he had been baited there with a false vision, and that Sirius showing up was just icing on the cake to them. Harry wasn't foolish – the Sorting hat had said he'd do well in any house, so he had to assume he wasn't stupid. He just didn't learn things like Hermione, and that made him second guess his own actions.

Learning by example, trial and error was Harry's way. No matter how many times he could read a spell or formula, doing always worked best for him. True, the work he'd done this summer was all beneficial, but it wasn't practical. He was learning process, not practice. Theory, not application.

Perhaps that was why he had problems just... accepting or feeling the gravity of Sirius's death. There was no body. Unlike Cedric, the first time he'd seen death up close, there wasn't anything, anything at all, to prove he was dead. He knew better than to believe Sirius to still be alive, but the proof otherwise wasn't there. Sighing, Harry scrubbed at his unruly hair and tried to organize his thoughts, failing as usual when he tried to approach this particular line. No matter how many times he tried, nothing seemed to resolve the lack in his mind, the gaping void that seemed to swell up and threaten to swallow him up. So he dodged, avoided it at all costs. There would be time enough to grieve the lost after the war.

If he survived it.

Sighing, he settled down and watched the setting sun, Monday dying in vivid, beautiful colors outside his window. Soon night would fall, and he'd put his next plan in motion. Till then... with a weary groan Harry flopped onto his cot and cleared his mind of all thoughts, focusing only on a single idea. What Occlumency training he had with Snape seemed a waste, but he tried regardless. In the blankness of his mind, the words of the Prophecy hovered, rearranged themselves, changed into other words and meanings. He still had no idea how specifically the Riddle of Riddle would play out. It seemed too vague. Too open-ended. Frustrated, his concentration broke and Harry sat up into the now early night, grumbling to himself about greasy, good-for-nothing Potion Masters.

The night drew on and Harry fought sleep, glancing at his watch again and again as he waited for eleven o'clock to pass. Finally, with his cloak on and his wand in his pocket, Harry popped the locks on his door with Sirius's knife, and made a quiet retreat to the back garden.

His cloak settled about him like a blanket again, Harry lay on the ground and watched the stars turn overhead. He picked out his Godfather's namesake easily, watching it glint merrily above him. His smile grew when he felt a slight weight settle a small distance to the side, and a muffled sigh.

"Wotcher, Tonks," he hazarded, knowing it was her shift tonight.

Hands reached up and pulled back the hood of her cloak, breaking it's charm. Tonks stared back at the Boy-Who-Lived, a smirk settling on his lips. "Lovely night, isn't it?" was her only reply for many moments, as her head spun at being picked out from her guard so easily. Perhaps it wasn't wise to join the young man in stargazing. Curiosity getting the better of her, she turned to Harry again, "How did you know it was me, Harry?"

The young man smiled, shaking his head a bit as the stars reflected back from his eyes. "You're the only one I was never able to really spot." Chuckling a bit, he turned back to the sky with a sigh. "I'm sorry, about the other night."

Tonks lay back and took in the night sky, riddles of her own gnawing at her mind. "It's alright, I know why you were cross with me. We really did mean well."

"I know. Meaning well has gotten me a lot of bad situations, is all. I just seem to do better when left to my own devices, I suppose," shaking his head, Harry considered the young Auror beside him for an uncomfortably long moment. "Why do you do it?"

Rousing herself with a small noise, Tonks looked back into Harry's eyes. "Do what?"

"Work for the Order." He prompted simply.

"Never a simple one, you," she quipped, but seemed to quiet in thought. A minute passed, and Harry wondered if he'd asked something wrong, when she answered. Her voice was quiet – almost a whisper. He leaned a bit closer to make sure he didn't miss it. "You know my family. My mum was disowned by that horrible woman,

Walburga. You know her, she's the loudmouth blood-purist who's painting is in Grimmauld."

"Ugh. Why doesn't someone just take that hideous thing down?" Rolling his eyes, Harry sat back, his face a mask of distaste at the memories of the painting's rants.

"Permanent sticking charm. Plus, she's so loud up close it's painful." Laughing at a memory, Tonks sat up a bit, leaning back on her elbows. "Well, to continue... I suppose Sirius was also a part of it." Smiling sadly, she looked back up to the sky. "I knew he was innocent. Knew he'd never betray your parents. But no one did anything to stop what happened..." she trailed off there, quiet sobs stealing her words. She shook her head, sighing as the tears quietly rolled down her cheeks. "I miss him."

Harry didn't expect someone else to break down like this, at least in front of him. It broke all the usual molds he'd imagined and assumed that adults took. He was the emotionally unstable one. He was the one that needed support and comfort. He was the one with the loss... yet here was Tonks, sobbing alone in the dark under the light of her cousin's namesake.

Summoning up what made him Gryffindor, Harry leaned over and wrapped an arm around Tonks's shoulder, pulling her to sit beside him gently. "Shh, hey it's ok. You're not alone in this. Everyone misses him, but..." He fell silent, realizing that his stumbling comforting of the young woman had pushed him to his own realization.

"B-But what?" Sniffing back her tears at being comforted by the young man whom she'd resigned to be a shoulder to, Tonks watched as the thoughts mirrored in his eyes, played across his face.

Harry smiled sadly, taking a stilling breath. "He'd not want us to mourn him. He'd want us to live."

Nodding, Tonks quirked her lip and reached up, ruffling the rampant mop that sat atop Harry's head. "Not just survive either. Live. I know

how he'd react to seeing us moping about, sighing and throwing ourselves onto couches dramatically-"

"I've never thrown myself dramatically, or otherwise I think, onto a couch," Harry argued, trying to stifle a laugh. He failed when Tonks cast a tickling and cheering charm on him, only managing to silence him after a few peals of laughter. She kept up the silly jinxes for a few minutes, till he was kneeling and making begging motions with his hands.

"You wicked witch, I thought my sides would split," gasping, Harry grinned and fell back to the side, lazing on the cool grass. "But you're right. He'd want us to actually live our lives. He'd had so little chance to, for so long."

Tonks smiled, and felt a weight of worry she'd not realized she'd born lift from her heart. "I know he would. And you're right, he'd be so cross with us, he'd likely hex us to Sunday for being so morose." Stretching from her lazing, Tonks peered at Harry thoughtfully, causing the young man to fidget under her intense gaze.

"Er, Tonks? What is it?" He finally asked, unnerved by the long focus on him.

Snapping herself from her reverie, Tonks smiled and reached into her robes for a moment. "I think then, that it's time I gave you something."

Harry watched with some anxiety, as the somewhat older woman reached into her robes with a small smirk on her lips. He didn't know if he was being teased or just reading something into the action, but his eyes tracked immediately to the exposed rise of her collarbone, the delicate joining of her shoulder and neck. He swallowed, trying to soothe a suddenly dry mouth as the Auror took a small package from an internal pocket of her robe. "Take it, and don't open it till I'm gone. As much as I know he wanted you to have it... I can't get into this much trouble yet, OK?"

"I... yeah. No problem," Harry managed to stutter, snapping his eyes back up to Tonks's, seeing in them a playfulness he'd not expected.

She noticed his slight preoccupation, and only her Metamorph abilities kept her blush from rivaling the afternoon sunset. "Ah. Anyway," pulling her robes back in place, she handed him the skin-warmed package. "He wanted you to take this. I found the note and package in his room after... but he asked that you be ready. I guess he wanted to make sure you didn't do anything hasty or too rash."

"You're just making me really curious Tonks, but if you really mean for me to not open it with you on guard, I'll do it." Harry eyed the small package and barely contained his anxiety and excitement. Sirius had left him something, something important.

Nodding as if that was the end of it, she handed him the parcel. "Just read the note. I know what it says already, and will do what I can to help." Peering at the sky, she used her wand to conjure a small time display. "Oh hells, half an hour behind on patrol, Figg'll be sending a cat over any minute to check on me," wringing her hands and looking not at all the official Auror, Tonks yanked Harry up on to his feet and wrapped an arm around him. "Hang on."

Harry did just that, but the surprise of it all had him stumbling out of the sudden Apparation and topping the two onto his bed with a muffled thump. Fearing the wall being too close to his head, and an imminent impact, Harry had closed his eyes. The sound of a slight chuckle and the feel of something warm and soft under his hands brought him back to the moment, and his eyes snapped open in shock.

"Well, seems we're not afraid to take the first step at all. No wonder you were in Gryffindor," Tonks teased, easing Harry's hands off rather sensitive areas as she sat up upon his cot. To his credit, the young man blushed soundly and looked anywhere but at her for many moments. "No harm done Harry, but I'll remember to be a bit more careful Apparating with you in the future. Landing like that in public would cause quite a scene."

Tonks laughed as Harry sputtered apologies and tried to regain his composure, but failed at both as she stretched and bounced back to her feet. "Tonks," Harry stalled, noticing her looking out to the garden and street from his window.

"Hrm?"

Harry, took a calming breath and smiled slightly, "Thanks. For talking with me. For helping Sirius."

The young Auror stifled a snort and shook her head. "I should be thanking you. And besides, he was my favorite cousin." Straightening her robes and cloak, Tonks winked at him, causing his blush to rise again. "Be good, and failing that, don't get caught," and with a muffled crack of Apparation, she was gone. Smirking slightly, she nearly tripped on one of Figg's cats – Kneazle mixes the lot it seemed, and set about her patrol. She almost felt bad about leaving Harry sitting there with a sleep charm on his head set to go off in about... well now. Almost.

He was the heir to the Marauders after all. No sense tempting fate.

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With a start, Harry woke the next morning and blinked at his ceiling. "What? Uhh, why did I sleep in my clothes?" Glancing around, he found the parcel Tonks had left, as well as an unturned bed and himself, just as he'd come in from the garden. "Doesn't make any sense – wait. Oh you evil witch!" Rolling his eyes and grouching, he sighed what he felt had to be the explanation, "Sleep charm."

Rolling to his side, he ran a finger along the dyed-black paper that wrapped the thin parcel. It was about the size of a telly remote, albeit a large one. Unwrapping the parcel, Harry found himself staring at a small folded note, and a lacquered box that seemed to have no opening. Fumbling with it, even shaking it gently did nothing to reveal it's secrets, and hoping that it wasn't magically sealed, Harry turned to the note, which in his hands, resolved to a long parchment.

To my wayward Pup,

Ah lad, were it not so you had to read this! Each time, every time I went on some Order mission I worry that this note should find you. Know, son that I wish were mine, it isn't a fear of death that chills me. It's a fear of leaving you in the dark. Leaving you to the machinations of those that would use you, use you up till there's no Harry left! Gentle boy, I remember so long ago. Watching you smile at James and Lily, taking you up on brooms as she chased us about the estate and grounds like a harridan. Oh, her hexes on us were legendary! But enough memories. As you will learn soon, there's more than enough of them. Trust me, Pup. I know you want them, any part and memory and trace of them. Trust me!

This box – a curiosity of sorts. It's a wizard's safe, lad. Keyed to you. Only you should be able to open it, as it works off a Law ancient and beyond the abilities of all but of a few. The lock is canny, and you will be some time in opening it. Forgive a Marauder his last prank, but know that in learning this one trick, you'll be much better armed for the future.

You may be wondering why I've taken such pains to secure such puzzles, find such traps and tricks. My boy, if there's a lesson that each of us in the Order could teach you, mine would be Question All! Moody's of course, his constant barmy rant about Vigilance! Regardless Pup, this one thing will serve you well. Give your trust where it is earned. Question all things. In those questions, find your own truths. I questioned, and during my long absence, while you were being deceived by the Triwizard cup, I found a great many things, things I wanted to share with you but could not. Always we were under another's eye. Always with that constant press of another's will! Oh, don't take me for a fool, I know Dumbledore's power. Political, Magical, Personal. The man is a force to be reckoned with, and were I a better man, I could have spared you this war, spared the horrible futility of fighting it as we have. Attrition! How meaningless. Perhaps he only knows this way, we get set in our thoughts and actions as time tempers us. Dumbledore could be so, simply a blade made too brittle over many temperings. Unable to bend, unable to turn from his ways.

Ah, forgive a man his rambling thoughts. While wandering, a man without a name, home or wand, you find a great many things different.

I happened upon a man, one who knew me from Azkaban. All did not go how I expected, and instead of a Dementor's Kiss, I received some words of advice, and some knowledge. Whether by accident or chance, your parents and I have set you on a path that will change this world. I know you are more than capable of this task.

Believe in yourself, as we believe in you.

My darling cousin Nymphadora sadly was tasked the delivery of this parcel, and no doubt has read this letter herself. Don't worry Pup, it's bewitched to show each reader a different missive. Ah to have seen Snivellus's face were he to read his personal message... ah well. Sometimes we must be content in knowing our misdeeds go unseen.

Now, for those that must be seen. Harry, with all gravity I must implore you to be wary. The reading of... or rather challenging of, my Will shall occur on the day before your birthday, at Gringott's of course. My Will would be void if it relied on the Ministry to be handled, I'm sure. One last thing Harry, and this is the most important part of this entire Will fiasco; do whatever the Goblins ask! Many do not trust them, but they are inviolate in their dealings with gold. Forgive me, but it's the last present I can give to you, and I wanted it done in such a way that none could contest what I was to do. Indulge an old dog one final trick my boy.

And now, for the Riddle,

A key to any door you'd find,
Yet from man to man, locked apart.
Made of skin of treant kind,
A hair or string, perhaps my heart.

A duel will show my master true,
Yet I need not attend his test.
Skilled with me, some often rule,
Yet skill without, an arduous quest.

To me this lock will stand unyielding,
But yet I hide within, to be sure.
To command me let your magic sing,

And become a key to your own future.

No doubt you felt the pulse of magic after that. No cheating on this test, my boy! You cannot utter a word of this to your friends, it'd ruin the surprise. It's also a way to make sure this is your prize alone. This Geis will break when you solve the Riddle. Win this, and you've earned your freedom.

That is what my final gift to you shall be, and this is but the first step. We've both been locked away, forgotten or used up, for too long, Pup. My last breath was likely taken, trying to make sure you were able to stay free. Free of terror, free of too early a fall to darkness.

And I would do it again.

All my love, son.

Sirius.

Harry ignored the small pulse of magic that stole over him at the reading of the Riddle, and only knew the world through tear-filled eyes for many minutes. Damn the Prophecy! Damn Dumbledore and Tom and all of it, he raged silently. With fumbling hands and a face lined with tears Harry sat and imagined and read the letter again. He could hear Sirius's voice. Feel his mirth-filled eyes on him. Feel the warm embrace of his arm across his shoulders. "Why did you have to go, Padfoot?"

Rereading the letter again and again, Harry set back his tears, locked them away. He would grieve another day. The task his Godfather had set before him was still there, and he would not leave the effort he put into this unanswered. Settling down with the nondescript box on his desk, and the letter in his hand, Harry pulled out his notebook and went to work.

Grudgingly, he thanked Snape for his few Occlumency lessons, while in the same thought cursing him for being so weak a teacher. The few exercises he knew let him focus his will alone on the Riddle, yet there was little to be gained from his first reading. Not close to giving up, Harry pulled out his previous books, looking for hints to the various

lines. As he was pulling out the various texts, his hand knocked against the box his wand had come in, the Ollivander's crest on the side catching his eye.

Brow furrowed, Harry turned and reread the first passage. "...skin of treant kind, a hair or string perhaps my heart." Pulling out his copy of the Monstrous Book of Monsters, he stroked it's spine and unlatched the many belts holding it closed. Flipping to the indices, he found a list in alphabetical order, and when he reached "T", located his target. Finding the passage he noted, Harry realized what he'd needed. "Treants. Trees. Skin of a tree... would be bark? Bark or wood. If that's right then..."

Taking up the box, Harry bit his lip and took a breath. "Wand," he said loudly, not quite a shout.

The box, unimpressed, sat quietly in his hand.

Frustrated, Harry set the thing back on his desk and set about cleaning up Hedwig's cage, changing her water as he grumbled to himself about how he had too many Riddles in his life, one was quite enough thank you very much.

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Tuesday came and went with much poring over his texts, trying to find some references to the Riddle that sat, it's lacquered black faces quiet on his desk. He spent a few minutes rereading Sirius's note, preparing himself mentally for the Will reading that was also mentioned. Oddly, he'd not received a letter as such, but figured that to be one of many things he'd be kept in the dark about. Or perhaps, a simple enough mistake. Who knew how Goblins handled their mailing.

The next morning, after his Uncle had made his way huffing and puffing all the time to work, Harry stole out of his room being careful to relock his door with the back of his knife, and snuck past his Aunt to the back garden. Choosing a place by the shade of a tree that was

mostly hidden from the house and prying eyes, he dropped the hood of his cloak and leaned against the cool bark of the Ash tree, smiling at the lovely day spread out before him.

Not soon after, he felt rather than heard or saw, the presence beside him and turned a smile on his visitor. "Wotcher, Tonks."

"One day, Harry, I'll have you tell me how you do that," the Auror groused, sighing as she leaned against a hedge. Knowing there were still muggles in the house, she kept her hood up and voice down, not wanting to cause the Harry any more difficulty than he already had.

Laughing silently, he shook his head. "To be honest, I can't really say. No one else really... well feels like you."

Harry couldn't see the smirk, but he could hear it in the voice that answered him, "Oh, and I suppose you'd know that very well after Monday night, eh Mr. Potter?"

Stuttering and sputtering, he reddened under Tonks's laughter. "Oh relax Harry, I was simply putting one over on you. Was an accident, I know."

Huffing a bit, he regardless smiled, looking in the rough direction she seemed to be in. "Thank you for delivering his note, Tonks. I means a lot to me, to read what he had to say."

"Not at all, but I'm dead curious what's in the box. What was it?"

Smirking a bit, Harry shook his head. "Not sure, I can't open it yet." When he was met with silence, he figured Tonks to be in the same state he had been in after his failed attempt. "I'll get it open, just can't yet. There's a... complex lock." Grimacing, he realized the Geis kept him from even mentioning the Riddle.

Tonks thought this through a moment, then sighed. "Well if there's anything I can do to help, let me know." Still somewhat sleepy from her less than restful night at Grimmauld, she leaned back against the hedge with an audible yawn.

"Long night?" Harry inquired simply, his eyes unfocused but in her direction.

Nodding, she snorted and answered, forgetting for a second he wasn't able to see her. "Yes, somewhat long. Had to catch up on some paperwork regarding a few of our more productive hunts. Kept me at the Ministry well into the night."

"I'm sorry my guard detail is so bothersome to people's lives. Why does he insist on such?" As he spoke, Harry's voice dropped, all kindness and warmth fading. Tonks was surprised at the rancor in his voice, as he spoke of who had to be Dumbledore.

"Harry, what is it between you and the Headmaster? What am I hearing in your voice?"

With a grim smile, Harry shook his head, "I'm sorry Tonks, but that's for me alone, right now. I know you're concerned, but you're also Order. His Order."

Tonks looked away, not wanting to see the disappointment in Harry's eyes, especially when she was in such an ill-suited place to dispel it. "As you say, Harry," she replied simply, quietly. Their silence stretched on, only broken by the occasional bird or insect choosing to sing. That reminded him of his Riddle, and frustrated anew, he pored over the final passage.

Watching his face change with his focus, Tonks smiled to herself, wondering what had the young Gryffindor struggling so. "Knut for your thoughts, Harry?"

Looking up, startled from his pondering he laughed quietly, "Oh, just this... idea. I've been around Wizards since I was eleven, yet so much of the magical world is still beyond me. Like... well magic itself. When you use it, how does it feel? How is it supposed to feel?"

Thinking on this, she shrugged, sighing as she again remembered the motion would be lost, her cloak still in place. "Hard to say. It's different for everyone, but the one standard I guess, is that you feel it

when you do magic. It's like a reserve of water, sometimes unseen, that you draw on."

"Always? What about if you never feel... well like it's there?"

Tonk's quiet laughter rang out on the yard. "Only Squibs and muggles wouldn't be able to feel their magic, Harry."

"But I don't," he argued, looking more distressed as they talked. "I mean, when I do it, I like the feeling, but there's no... well reservoir as you said. I don't know where it comes from. It's just there."

Considering this, and her three years of Auror training, Tonks asked him another question, hoping to clarify their misunderstanding, "So, when you do a lot of magic, say... and I'm sorry to bring it up, but like at the Ministry last year, did you feel like you were running low? Like you were weary and the casting of each spell got harder?"

Harry shook his head, sighing. "No, not at all. If anything, by the time it was all over, the only thing I felt was rather beat up. I've never felt my magic, so maybe that's why I was so disbelieving of Hagrid when he came for me that first year."

"Harry, everyone should be able to feel their magic. It's like your endurance; you know when it's about at the end, when you're running a long time. You feel weary, your energy is low and unsteady." Pausing, Tonks remembered her training, how the advanced magic books described it. "Aurors train hard during their second year to recognize that wearying, and to pace themselves. There's nothing worse than feeling yourself go dry of magic when you're in the middle of a long fight."

Brow knit in thought, Harry considered her words for a long time. "Maybe I just feel it differently. One more thing, then... ah well."

"Why the sudden worry on it?" Worried herself now, Tonks leaned down and knelt by the young man, reaching out with a hand to his arm, to warn him of her presence. "Do you feel ill, maybe? Something I should tell Poppy?"

Shaking off her worry and hand, he regardless grinned at the young Auror. "No, nothing like that. Just a question I need to answer on my own."

Unconvinced, Tonks still lingered by his side. "Well, if you say so. Still, if you need anything that I can help with, I'll be glad to. Just give me some notice so I can arrange the time if it'll take a while," grinning, she pulled Harry into a hug. "I should get to my patrol."

Returning the sudden embrace, Harry thankfully leaned into it. He'd come to remember his small moments with Sirius as the happiest of his life, and they always showed him that to share just a bit of kindness, something as small as a hug or smile, could do much for one. "Alright, I'll head back inside," Harry replied, but stopped as he stood. "Tonks, did you get a letter of some sort from Gringott's?"

"I know I'm a bit late on that one loan, but Merlin, are they asking you now, Harry?" Seeing the young man's eyebrows rise in surprise, she laughed and cuffed him on the shoulder. "Yes, I got a letter, for the day before your birthday." She expected Harry to be a bit melancholy at the news, but not the anger she noticed in his eyes. "Ah, would you rather I not be-"

"No, I mean. I'd like to see you there," Running a hand through his hair, Harry sighed and leaned against the tree where he stood. "Damn him, manipulative old bastard..."

Tonks worried at Harry's reaction, and apparent rage, so she moved so the tree was between herself and the house, and dropped her hood. "Harry, what is it?"

Harry took in Tonks's sudden appearance with a small guilty smile, as he'd missed seeing her as they spoke. It was, in part at least he admitted to himself, that she was a very pretty young woman, but also he was used to her appearance being a barometer of sorts for him. Today, her hair was a dull, shineless blue that matched her eyes, almost the color of the summer sky. "I just feel like someone is working against me is all. I didn't get a letter, in fact I almost get the feeling my mail is being misdirected."

"Who would... it's illegal to do such a thing!" Tonks railed, her hands curled into fists in her cloak as she thought about the repercussions of such a thing. "It... I see." Her own face and voice going cold, Harry wondered for a moment at the similarity between Tonks and her aunts. Narcissa and Bellatrix seemed to be cut from the same cloth as Sirius, the high aristocratic cheeks and clean features of all three almost seemed lost on Tonks. Until, at least, she was angry. Then the resemblance became uncanny, as the Black family features seemed most predominant in her when she was upset.

Harry nodded, eyes turned skyward, as if pleading for a sign that he was wrong. "So it would seem."

"Tell me what you need, Harry. You know I'll help. If the bond we share through Sirius wasn't enough, then let me assure it as a friend in some way, at least," turning her fathomless eyes on him, Harry nodded once, solemnly.

Regarding those deep eyes, Harry felt that connection, that bond through Sirius strongly. The mettle in him reflected in Tonks, his will and determination. "At Grimmauld, there is a library, if there is a book there on wands, bring it to me. Also anything on magical theory... like how it dwells in people." Tonks nodded in return and stood to go on her patrol, her smile gone in favor of a grim focus. Harry, unwilling to part so, chased after her and drew her back into the shade of the tree, before she raised her hood. "And Tonks, there's no need to prove anything. I know you're a true friend." Smiling, all be it hesitantly, Harry hugged the Auror and felt her relax a bit into his arms.

"Thank you, Harry. Again, you know just what to say..." leaning back, she cuffed him on the arm again. "Perhaps that's the power he knows not eh?" Turning to leave, she missed the look of shock on Harry's face.

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Wednesday passed slower after his meeting with Tonks. Too much had happened to think on, in such a small time. All in one small slice

of morning he had learned that Sirius's Will was being kept a secret, and possibly from not just him. The fact that his magic was likely too weak to be felt like another's also was telling on him, but the simple realization made much sense. He'd assumed most magical people knew, in some way, that they were so. Even Hermione had more awareness of her nature, and she was muggleborn and raised.

Then there was the bombshell that Tonks dropped on him in parting. "She knows. She knows the Prophecy. How does she know it?" Wracking his brain, he wondered if perhaps Dumbledore had spoken to the Order of it, but discounted it. He'd not show his hand to Snape, regardless. Some slip, some mistake could have Voldemort with the knowledge, and then what? All of last year's sacrifices, for nothing.

No, not even Dumbledore would make that error. He relied on the Prophecy too much for that same thing to be out of his control. He needed it, like he needed Harry. Pausing, the Boy-Who-Lived ran that last thought through his mind again. He, Dumbledore, needed Harry.

His mind running in pointless circles, Harry slumped into his desk chair and stared unseeing at the box, the Riddle, upon his desk. It was a surety that Dumbledore had manipulated, guided, even confided in Harry since he'd met him. It was also a surety he was responsible for the horrible years he'd suffered at the hands of the Dursleys. But was he so ill intentioned that he'd have done it all, knowingly? Did he simply trust his Aunt, blindly, like most of Wizarding kind would have? Sighing, Harry nodded, answering his questions in it's asking.

He had no idea about the Headmaster's family, but perhaps his faith reflected it. Questions upon questions shuffled about in Harry's mind as the day wore on to night, and he slipped into his cot with troubled and noisome thoughts.

Chapter Two.

Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing.

– Conan the Cimmerian, The Tower of the Elephant

The day grew close to an end, and Harry rubbed at the bridge of his nose, upsetting his glasses again. Smirking a bit, he rubbed at the small scotch tape binding that held the two halves together over his nose. Again he'd broken them, but the event wasn't an unpleasant memory.

As he'd asked, Tonks had brought him some books to occupy him with and assist in his studies. This on it's own was great news, but the delivery of them was less than ideal. Chuckling, drinking one of the butterbeer he'd managed to coerce her into bringing for him, Harry remember the look of horror on her face as, when Apparating to his room, she found him quite naked after a shower. Not horrified by him so much as barging in, she'd promptly dropped the stack of books on his bed and Disapparated with a mighty crack, something that left his ears ringing for nearly an hour. He's managed to collect himself and go out to the garden, waiting nearly an hour for her to come back and settle on the bench nearby.

Friday morning had bloomed and was nearing midday when she finally cleared her throat, apologizing profusely for her rudeness. Harry had laughed it off, instead choosing to focus on thanking the young Auror for her help in smuggling him some books to read, and help with his task.

Harry settled back into the book he was currently skimming through, Wandcraft: A Study of a Changing Art, though to be honest it seemed less relevant to his current problem. He'd nearly set it to the side for another when a particular section stood out, as he skimmed the index again.

"How wands pick their masters? Worth a try, I guess," he murmured, turning to the proper passage and devoting himself to the text. A few hours later he pulled free, a thoughtful look on his face. If the book

was correct... then he was the rightful master of a few wands that could be found at Hogwarts. An odd revelation in itself, but even more interesting was the fact that since the Department of Mysteries battle, that number increased. The Death Eaters he'd disarmed, or simply defeated, all counted in his wand tally. Reading further his brow furrowed, coming across the following passage;

...wand shares the strongest bond to it's owner at it's initial 'choosing'. As a simple magical focus, a wand of course no more 'chooses' an owner than a pair of shoes. But as with shoes, the fit is there. In each being with magic, there is a particular harmony to their power. That harmony can be matched to a wand, much like tuning a violin's strings.

A magical being can find great benefit from a wand that shares their own traits. As with all things, changing times change wizards, and with the growth of one's magical core, the growth of personality and capability, a wand becomes less an ideal focus, as a clouded lens. Care should be given that as one nurtures their growing ability, that a wand allows for same to grow, or is replaced as times change and the wielder follows suit. As with all wandcrafters and students of the craft, I disregard the ramblings that were recently cast down by the Council of Wizardry in regard to the Stablose Magie; Theorie und Praxis and it's adherents.

Harry closed the book, after marking the page with a small slip of paper, one of many poking up at odd angles from the large tome. The repercussions of the passage made him look to the loose floorboard, where his own wand rested. "I wonder how badly Tom's suits him now – well, there's a sobering thought. As badly as it does, he's still that powerful," stifling a shudder, Harry turned to his window and considered the rest of his day. "Hrm. Still have a few hours..." gathering his knife and cloak in a familiar ritual, the young man stole from the house, the large tome gripped under an arm uncomfortably.

The afternoon had some time ago given way to night, but since it was Friday, he knew Tonks was on a double shift covering both the morning and afternoon ones, till eleven PM. Settling in his familiar place by the Ash tree in the back garden, Harry flipped the book to the proper place and waited, hoping his guard wasn't on her patrol.

Tonks noticed Harry's tell-tale footsteps leading to the back garden, and stifling her curiosity, stayed at her chosen position atop the house till Ms. Figg settled the last of her Kneazle-mix cats and with a knowing glance, went back inside. "Bloody bat takes long enough, wonder how many of those damned cats she has now," the Auror mumbled, dispelling the shrinking charm on her Cleansweep and making her way down to the side path.

She was determined this time to get the jump on Harry. She was behind in the game, and it was time for her to catch up. Setting a Notice-me-not charm on her shoes, she added a Disillusionment charm to her cloak on top of its Demiguise-woven invisibility. A silencing charm and she was set.

Padding quietly along the path behind Harry, she quietly congratulated herself as she settled behind him, reading over his shoulder for a moment. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Harry practically turned to look directly in her eyes. "Violets this time?"

Squeaking her surprise and falling backward, Tonks bruised her rear on the garden border, laid brick on the vertical, and sat rubbing at the sore spot while glaring daggers at the young man. "How the devil Harry? Just tell me, this is making me spare!"

Harry had to good sense not to chuckle at Tonks's expense. "What did I say when you were leaning over me?"

She gave it a moment's thought and groaned. "Violets. My shampoo."

"Right in one. You always smell nice, so it's easy to tell it's you."

Huffing, she settled by the spot in the hedge she knew was veiled from the house, still glaring slightly at the Boy-Who-Could-Always-Tell-It-Was-Her. "How did you get so good at stealth, Harry? You're better at this than Sirius."

Giving it a moment's thought, he smirked and shook his head. "I guess I have Filch to thank really. Him and Ms. Norris are a nasty pair. She can always smell me out of my cloak, and so I had to be

careful to always smell neutral when I was out and about when I wasn't supposed to be."

Tonks stared at him in mild shock, before breaking out into laughter, shaking her head slowly. "Figures you'd have picked it up following in the Marauder's foot... er paw? Prints." Settling herself on a bit of bunched up cloak, she peered at the book Harry was poring over. "Look at you – like a Ravenclaw there. What's got your eyes glued so tonight?"

"This reference, actually, c'mere and read," Harry answered, making room on the lee side of the Ash for her. Tonks slid over and read the passage he'd outlined, her own brows rising slightly. "Well now, learn something new every day," pulling out her own wand, she ran her eye over it critically. "Wonder if I should pay a visit to Ollivander."

Harry nodded, thinking back to his own wand. "I'd been thinking along the same line," he replied, watching Tonks transfigure some small blades of grass into odd little chirpy birds that huddled together in pairs. "What is yours?"

"Hrm? Oh, it's rowan, with a unicorn hair core. Eleven inches," she said quietly, very conscious now of how close Harry was to her.

Tonks looked up at Harry's quiet laugh. "Same length as mine. Holly with a feather from Fawkes, he said. Same core as Voldemort's, apparently." He didn't miss the small gasped breath she took at the mention of Tom's taken name, and sighed. "Tonks. It's just a name-

"I know, and trust me I try to say it too. But when you've spent your whole life with it as a curse and pall over your life and family, it just takes a while to shake off," she bit out, feeling irate at herself how she, six years Harry's senior, couldn't say the name she cringed at.

Harry sighed, a contrite cast to his face. "Sorry, I forget. I wasn't really aware of him till it was really too late I suppose. His name, he himself holds no terror to me. Only anger. Only a sadness at the things he's done. All the people he's taken, and would take from me."

She nodded, seeing easily how he could be so flippant with a name that was synonymous with death and torture in their world. Pulling herself back to the book he's showed her, the passage on wands, she pursed her lips in thought. "Why, well other than making me want to go to Ollivander's, did you show me that passage, Harry?"

Following his finger, she noticed the title of a book, near the end of that page. "Huh, don't recognize that one. Let me guess – you want me to look it up?"

Grinning at her answer, he nodded quickly. "I think it could be the k..." sighing, he seemed to concentrate a moment. "A good resource, for this problem I have."

"Quite a problem, if you can't name it," she replied evenly, watching him with a concerned expression. "Is this something we need to-"

"No! I mean, really, no. It's part of Sirius's gift, I just can't talk about it. Geis." When Tonks whistled, her brows rising, he nodded. "Yeah, he was serious about this one. Made sure I worked for it," laughing quietly, Harry stretched against the Ash tree and grimaced, as his stomach took that moment to growl angrily at him.

Tonks laughed, standing to stretch herself. "Should I bring you some food next time I 'visit'," she asked, giving him more than a cursory glance this time. She realized her error, and also that it must be one many made about Harry. His eyes had such magnetism that few noticed how dreadfully thin he was. It didn't help that he wore such horribly ratty muggle hand-me-downs, but in truth he did lean to the unhealthily thin side. "How about I do one better," she offered, thinking out loud.

Harry curled back in on himself instinctively, not wanting to make an issue of himself. "What do you mean?"

"Aurors often have to work long shifts, or multiple ones. We don't get time for regular meals, and we few in the Order even less time," smiling, she softened the words with a hand on Harry's shoulder. "We get potions that supplement our diets and help keep up in optimal shape. Would you be interested in a round?"

Blinking at the offer, Harry was on his feet in a moment, staring at her intensely, nearly making the young woman back up in surprise. "Tonks, do they have something like... I don't know. A body conditioning potion?"

Shaking her head with a small laugh, Tonks had to consider his words a moment to answer. How she wanted to say yes! Such focus and intensity, it was no wonder he was the talk of the young women at the Order. "No, not legally anyway, Harry. That's one thing we'll have to work on the old fashioned way."

Nodding, somewhat disappointed, Harry none the less grasped on to the branch she'd offered. "Well, those other potions would do wonders. At least until I can get out of that place behind me."

"Agreed. I'll bring by a week's supply on Monday. Maybe when the Will reading happens you'll not look so peaky, like last summer."

Rolling his eyes, Harry gave Tonks a glare that set her to chuckling, "Yes, Mrs. Weasley."

"Hey now, surly git!" Swatting at his arm, she still laughed, pulling her hood to place. "Anyway, time to go on patrol. Anything else you can think of that may help out, before I leave you to your weekend?"

Harry considered the question, and shook his head. "Only that book. Or, if the Ministry library can, any that reference it. By the sound of it, something either bad or not well taken was in there, so a copy of it may be hard to get."

"Right, sounds like a sound plan. Rather Ravenclaw as well, sure you're not one in truth?" Tonks teased, snickering slightly as she made her way back to the street. She turned at a quiet retort, one that made her eyes widen, but she was sure she misheard him. Pulling her hood in place and secure in her invisibility, she went on her rounds, a phantom his voice chasing after her.

Harry waved after Tonks, his reply hopefully lost to the wind, despite his honesty in saying it.

"Perhaps if you were there with me."

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The Dursleys were gone most of the weekend, citing some small outing involving Grunnings and it's directorship. This left Harry locked in his room with a pack of crackers and a bottle of water that would hardly have lasted a man a day, were they not in possession of Harry's trinkets. Left to his own devices, the Boy-Who-Lived enjoyed the freedom of having he house to himself, all be it carefully.

Without magic to repair things, he'd be hard-pressed if somewhat were broken or far out of place when they returned.

Television was a right waste of time, as nothing there so much as sparked an interest to Harry, neither did the normal wireless programs. Muggle entertainment was scarce and pale compared to what he knew, yet one thing seemed to catch his eye.

Sifting through the various DVD's the piggish young Dudley kept, Harry came upon a rather interesting series, seemingly about a young man in a robe with a sword of light, a princess, and a man in a dark black mask.

Hours later left a somewhat befuddled and thoughtful Harry, and three thoroughly watched DVD's. Shaking off he odd impulse to make sure Voldemort wasn't by some odd chance his father, Harry replaced all his entertainment, cleaned up his mess, disposed of his 'meals' and settled back in his bed.

His dreams were rife with a mish-mash of his own life, filtered through the eyes of a young Skywalker.

Monday came with a great noise at the window, and Harry rose to greet the few owls, none he recognized, that waited attending. No less than three lighted on his bed, all vying for space and priority till

Hedwig, previously sleeping soundly, screeched and settled the lot. "Thanks girl," he mumbled, still addled by his own interrupted sleep.

He chose the largest of the three, and plucking the letter free, was relieved to see it wing off on its own. Unfolding the parchment he found a letter by an unexpected source – Fleur.

Dear Harry,

I have some dire news that you or the Order may not be aware of truthfully, Harry. There are hints that there is a spy among your very friends, something that everyone has wondered to themselves, really. I do hope you are careful, everyone here misses you badly. Gabrielle is very excited with the wedding, every day she talks rounds about it, mostly Dad ends up the worst off, but there again, we all are trying. At Ottery St. Catchpole, at least we hope, to have the evening for the ceremony sooner than school begins.

Overall, we are well. We hope Dumbledore shall let you come to see us in Grimmauld soon.

Monthly we'll be visiting. Till then, Harry!

Additionally, Gabrielle is telling me in no uncertain terms, that you must attend the wedding, and be her escort.

Other news, Bill is working to help me find a position at Gringott's, working at the international offices.

Missives should be more regular, Harry! I hope this finds you well, and that you take my warning. Be well, Harry.

Regards,

Fleur Delacour,
Bill Weasley (I rewrote it from French for her, but she insisted on this last part)

PS: We had it set on the first of the fourth month, but decided to do it the other way.

A quiet word unlocks the knot. - Fleur

"What the bloody hell does that postscript mean?" Deciding to ask Tonks when he saw her, Harry set aside the confusing letter and only after, noticed the knot, Celtic in origin, stamped into the back of the stationary. Pondering, he looked at the letter again, and reread the postscript, feeling there was more to it than just a simple watermark.

He was brought out of his musing by the other owls, still staring impatiently for him. Choosing the next in the line, he plucked the letter from its leg and noticed it too made its way off into the Monday sky.

Mr. Potter,

Though we may not be on speaking, or even friendly terms, I must impress on you the gravity of this letter. Situations are quickly arising that would cause great turmoil in the camp of the Dark Lord, and you are instrumental in this.

Despite the pleas you may hear, do not acquiesce to anything that the enemy camp demands! Life or death may be bandied about, but do not waver in what you feel to be right.

I shall not contact you again, the risk is too great. This letter was sent at great personal cost.

N.

Harry puzzled at this letter, suddenly scared for anyone else that would be attending the reading with him. He wished he'd kept the owl to ask for more details, but with it already gone he was even more in the dark than before. And who could this "N" be? How could he make such an impact on the Dark Lord, from just a Will?

"Oh Sirius, what have you set in motion, and how will this all play out," he asked the last owl, earning him a quizzical glance from the bird.

Taking the letter, he watched the bird for any sign it wanted a response, but saw none and sighed, another possibly cryptic note

now clutched in his hand. Warily he checked the letter and saw only the Ministry seal, relaxing. "Irony isn't it Hedwig? A Ministry letter being the one that doesn't bother me."

A gentle hoot was the only response, as he broke the wax seal with the Ministry crest.

Attn: Harry James Potter,

We were recently made aware that you were to come into possession of what could be a property containing many items of a dark magical nature. As with all inheritance issues, the details of such property changing hands is not required, but highly recommended, to be handled by the Ministry.

To facilitate and avoid any future confusions on the legality of the property and its contents, the Department of Magical Inheritance and Titles would like to extend the offer to officiate the Will reading of one Sirius Black, current and standing Heir of the House and Title Lord Black.

Regards,

Gregory Wells, esq.

Department of Magical Inheritance and Titles

Harry took a deep breath before laying this particular letter down inside Hedwig's cage with a satisfied smirk. "I think you can appreciate this one properly, girl."

The rest of his day was spent in a mild melancholy, as the letters had put him on edge and made him dread what he had not before. Sirius's Will had not concerned him, after he'd read his Godfather's letter. Not even the fact such had been kept from him, apparently till today, had it occurred to him to be concerned about it. Sirius had made it clear some prank, either in the reading or the beneficiary, should be expected, but now Harry doubted his Godfather had planned enough for the event.

Deciding not to worry on such things when there was nothing he could do about them before the fact, Harry delved again into his studies, this time focusing on a book detailing magical theory, in regard to humans, house-elves, centaurs and 'changed' humans. It was a bit beyond Harry, but what he did glean from the lofty work was at least enough to answer one of his early curiosities.

He'd often seen Dobby about Hogwarts during his time there, and as each time it seemed the somewhat odd elf had been able to Apparate or the equivalent without difficulty. Harry knew one could be keyed into the wards around the castle school, but didn't expect the Headmaster to do so, just for an elf. Or all the elves. This lead Harry to wonder at the nature of those wards, and what made them keep students and people who could Apparate from doing so, as well as how Dobby had managed to do so inside the Dursley's home. The simple reason seemed frankly foolish to Harry — wizards didn't bother to ward beyond their own species. If what he read was correct, most wards when erected only warded for the casters own species. It explained much, particularly last summer's near-fatal catastrophe with the Dementors.

He'd been side-Apparated into his room of course, but always by an Order member. The fact Snape was possibly also on that list worried him more than a little. Five years those wards had stood, but now Harry was worrying at them. The source of that was of course Dobby, but it quickly spiraled out, particularly when he considered the happening around the Triwizard Tourney.

"Tom has my blood. If Dumbledore thinks blood wards are safe... wouldn't it counteract? Would not those same wards protect even Voldemort now, if he were to come here?" Questions he didn't really want to think about set him to a fit of packing, stowing all he had and valued back in his trunk without a second thought.

By late that night Harry had worked himself into a state, and he sat rigidly on the bench behind the garden under his cloak even before Podmore had left his shift to Tonks's care. Such was how the young Auror found Harry, after a short whispered conversation with the other Order guard.

She could see the nervous worry written all over Harry, and sat beside him, being sure to make enough noise to let him know she was there. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Hey Tonks." Harry replied, looking nervously in her direction. "Not so good a night as last Monday, I'm afraid."

"I can see that," the Auror replied, laying a hand on the nervous young man's shoulder. "You're wound tight as a top, what's on your mind?" Tonks shifted her own small pack to the side, figuring it best to mention the potions and her research project after diffusing his odd mood.

Laughing nervously, Harry turned his emerald gaze to the hands that held the various letters, notes and research he'd done over the last week. "Everything, it seems. Letters from mysterious people, the Ministry, friends... Even my books are making me paranoid."

Taking a note from Harry's book, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer, trying to soothe his harried mind. "Want to talk about it some? Have you tried to talk to anyone else?"

Snorting he shook his head where it leaned on her shoulder, "No, I can't talk to anyone else. Hell, likely they'd go strait to Dumbledore and I can't have that. Too many Riddles to solve, and I'm not the 'brightest witch of the age' exactly, you know?"

"Well, that's one thing I'm glad of," Tonks quipped, earning her a curious glance from Harry. "Well, if you were a witch rather than a wizard..."

"Oh sod off," he sighed, shoving her back onto the bench and back to arm's length. Glaring slightly at the Auror's laughter, he noticed the pack she'd brought. "What's that?"

"The potions and the notes on that book you wanted me to look for. Have to say, you owe me for this one... But first, lets see what has you so upset, hm?" Reigning in her mirth, Tonks motioned to look at his sheaf of paperwork. Harry handed her a few pieces, and she went to work reading them in the low light of the late July night.

Fleur's letter seemed fairly strait-forward, and considering the source, a bit too much so. The note that Bill had corrected it so Harry would better understand made some sense, but then why wasn't she aware of those warnings, from the Order? Bill was a member after all... "Harry, what kind of bird delivered this letter?"

"Was an eagle-owl, rather large too. Kind of tawny I think. Don't properly remember," he murmured, reading the letter himself again for what could really be the thousandth time.

Tonks's brow furrowed in thought as she tried to remember if the Weasleys owned an eagle-owl, but stopped as she read the passage about Gringott's. "Bill... that was a Gringott's owl. He sent this from where he works, hoping it'd not be intercepted. Did it arrive with a number of others?"

Harry nodded, recalling that same Monday's morning. "There were three waiting, all at the same time. Seemed a bit foul tempered the lot too."

"He must have timed it, or brought it nearby when he knew the others would be released... Lets work on that one more in a minute. What about the others?"

Handing her the other letter, not having bothered to retrieve the one from the Ministry, Harry voiced the same confusion on the rather anonymous letter too. "I can't think of who would send me something like that. I mean... it almost sounds like a traitor inside Voldemort's camp, but who would be so bold?"

The young Auror considered that, but also the unbalancing nature of the letter and it's timing. "Great personal cost... perhaps they did know the price of betrayal. We'll know at the reading. At least we have some warning, even if it proves less than vital." Tonks considered the letters, then looked at Harry, tilting her head to bely her curiosity, "These letters wouldn't put you in such a state, what else is there?"

"I guess the thing that has me most concerned, is what I've been researching. I was curious how Dobby could Apparate into and out of this place's wards, when I thought everyone had to be keyed to them."

Tonks shrugged, considering, "House elves are usually attuned to their master's homes."

Shaking his head, Harry countered, "But then, he was working for Malfoy."

Blinking rapidly, Tonks realized what he meant. "Right. He could... they all do don't they? Hogwarts too?" Seeing where her mind had led her, Harry simply nodded. "Bloody. What a hole. Oh my... Kreacher."

Harry paled, remembering the foul-tempered old elf, and how he was Sirius's only company in Grimmauld for many months. He also realized that like most wizards, everyone had discounted Kreacher's presence at meetings and during idle talk. The possibilities for him to spy and betray them, especially with Sirius dead and no real master to the Black home weren't missed. "Do you think?"

"I'll find out," Tonks's tone was icy, something Harry had never heard on the Auror. The angle at which he sat wouldn't let him find her eyes, but he wagered there wasn't a hint of warmth to them. "As bad as that could be, I imagine Kreacher wasn't what was on your mind. What was your worry, though?"

Taking a calming breath, Harry pushed forward, knowing he may have to relive his worst moment in the cemetery, to properly explain his concern. "During the Triwizard, at the end, Voldemort took my blood to regain his body."

"He what?" aghast, Tonks stood and spun about in place, coming quickly to the same conclusion as Harry. "And you're protected by blood wards... what the hell!"

"My sentiments, really."

Tonks looked at Harry incredulously, then sat hard on the bench again. "He's had you here since then. Do the other wards work so well? They can't! What am I thinking, if simple wards worked on Voldemort, then the bloody wizarding world wouldn't piss themselves at his name!"

Harry's laughter snapped her out of her diatribe, and Tonks glared at him for the trouble. Waving his hands slightly, Harry grinned. "You said his name. I was just impressed, you didn't even stutter." When Tonks blushed slightly, her eyes going wide, he laughed again.

"So I did," Tonks mumbled, shrugging. "Wasn't really thinking about it. You've been rubbing off on me. But, all that aside. How is Dumbledore justifying you staying here, or keeping you safe?" She was making her own conclusions on that, as well as the Order's activities, and not liking what she thought.

Harry shook his head, sighing. "Honestly, I think it's more blind luck. He can't locate me, directly, but that won't keep him from trying. What wards I have probably keep him from seeing this place, like a muggle-repelling charm, but that, like Hogwarts and its wards, work on humans. Obviously he figured Dementors wouldn't care, as he sent them last year."

"Fenrir. He could send Grayback here. Is he really such a fool?"

"Tonks," Harry stood, settling his cloak about him, "don't worry on it."

She gaped at him like a fish for a moment before standing and stepping in front of the retreating young man. "Don't worry on it? Are you daft? Of course I'm going to worry on it! What do you expect me to do, sit by idly while You-Know-Who waltzes by, or sends some other horror to just snatch you up?"

"No more than I do, but you really don't... look." Sitting back down, he glanced around nervously, pulling at her sleeve. "Listen, alright? I'm leaving, probably soon. I've decided to get out of this place and try to find somewhere safe. Maybe the Burrow, maybe Grimmauld. I don't know. Hell, at this point the Leaky Cauldron would be an improvement."

Taking a deep breath, Tonks looked at Harry with sadness in her eyes, "But, you know Harry... he won't let you. If he finds you, if Dumbledore finds you, he'll simply send you back to this horrible place."

"I know that! But if I don't try, then what can I do?"

Fretting, Tonks picked up the note from Fleur and turned it over and around in her hands. "Lets... lets work on this, maybe I can come up with something as we puzzle it out. I know there's more to this than the obvious."

"Alright," sitting beside the pretty Auror, Harry settled his mind for the first time since that morning, abandoning all the rampant winds of his own confusion and focusing just on the Riddle, the note itself.

He pored over it quietly, rereading it, picking up odd inconsistencies. He asked Tonks, and she admitted even Bill didn't write that way, but she was unfamiliar with Fleur. Harry added that it wasn't like her to sound like she did, or the letter did.

"So," Tonks took the parchment and flipped it over in her hands a few time. "Either it's a fake, or a fabrication."

"Aren't those the same?"

Shaking her head, Tonks smoothed the paper out, motioning for Harry's notebook. Without hesitation, he handed it to her and waited for the Auror to continue. "A fake is simply a bad copy, something meant to look real. A fabrication is false, yes, but it may still come from the correct source. It may be something like a code or puzzle."

"Great an... more questions." Tonks raised a brow at his amended wording, to which he shrugged.

Harry took the letter and looked at it again. "This postscript is different. Has a tone that doesn't match the letter, but those are often hurried or corrections... maybe it's the key?"

Tonks nodded, taking a blank piece of paper and Harry's pen, and wrote the postscript again, just in her own way.

"First of the fourth," she muttered, then brightened, grinning. "Read through the letter, and tell me the first letter of every fourth word, Harry."

After a few moments bumbling, and a few mistakes, they had the result up to a point where a letter seemed to repeat, at which point Tonks looked at where Harry had marked and stopped. If what they had was a secret missive, the message was sobering to say the least. "I see words, but can it really be right?" Harry asked, going pale as he remembered something from when break began.

"Don't have the beer, D. watches owls' is what I can make of it. I'm stopping when we get to word 'Monthly', though," she explained, scribbling another set of letters after the first.

Harry watched her underline letters, and saw her reasoning. "They broke the line purposefully at month in the postscript. So you think the rest of it describes another code?"

"Fourth of the first this time. Since it began with a break, I'm using that as my queue."

Harry checked her work, and the word oddly made a simple kind of sense. "Ties?"

Tonks nodded, but flipped the paper over quickly, before attempting her guess. "Actually, I'm guessing it's not a word, but a key to a phrase." Grinning over at Harry, she nodded once, and he answered.

"Ties the knot," she said firmly, directly at the Celtic knot that adorned the back of the letter. As the words finished leaving her lips, the complex pattern unraveled, as if cut from the center. There in the middle of the page rested what looked like a shallow recess, and within it, Harry's Vault key.

"Brilliant," Harry murmured, reaching out and taking his key with a grin. "That was brilliant work Tonks!"

Blushing at the praise, she simply grinned back at Harry, shaking her head slowly. "You'd have gotten it before the reading, I'm sure. Well I could hope. But if what we read is correct... D. Dumbledore?"

"Has to be."

"So he is intercepting your mail. That part's easy enough, I think we've both come to that conclusion." She looked over the first part of the code, biting her lip as she considered it. "I don't get this part though. You're not of age to drink at all, what kind of beer are they worrying over?"

"Butterbeer," he said quietly. "I was sent a small case of it, seven bottles each week from the Weasleys."

Tonks sat in a daze, considering what that could mean. "No, no! None of the Weasleys would do anything to you," she noted the thoughtful look in Harry's eye and turned him to face her. "What is it, Harry? What has you considering that?"

He shook his head and tried to piece the odd parts of the puzzle together, but something wasn't fitting. It sat, jagged and with gaps. "When the first letter and bewitched package arrived, it seemed to have been off when I set it down. It cracked a bottle of the butterbeer and it smelled odd."

"Odd how, Harry?"

Scrunching up his eyes, Harry tried to remember the precise combination. "I think... well on top of the normal butterscotch and tart, there was... well wood polish. And treacle tart, which is too sweet for butterbeer, you know? Also I think there was a hint of lilies."

"None of that sounds bad, but to be... wait. Harry, what are your favorite things. Honestly, heartfelt favorite things?"

Confused, Harry flailed about thinking for a moment, searching for answers. "Well, flying – on a broom I suppose. Quidditch, and all.

Pictures of my mum and dad. Hogwarts, my friends." Shaking his head slowly, Harry trailed off.

"Wood polish for brooms. Lilies for your mother, and I can only hazard to guess you like treacle tart, yes?"

Nodding woodenly, Harry agreed.

Taking him by the shoulders, Tonks turned Harry to face her fully, "Harry, did you drink any of that butterbeer?"

"No, not since the first one broke. I checked all the rest, and they all smelled the same. It wasn't unpleasant, mind, just odd. Not like it should smell," he explained, motioning to the back of the garden, where he poured the lot out each time. "I pour them out there, as I can't really throw them in the garbage."

Tonks stood quickly and knelt by the oddly damp patch of soil, noting that the roses nearby were in particularly high bloom. "How recently have you added to this patch?"

"Three days?"

Murmuring a spell, Tonks hissed when the patch turned a fairly vivid red. "Amortentia."

Harry watched this all with growing confusion, finally he stood and came to Tonks's side, turning her to face him much as she'd done before. "What is Amor – Amortentia?"

Looking everywhere but at Harry, Tonks motioned to the bench again. "Sit, this may take a small while to sort out, and it'll not be pleasant." Sighing to herself, she resigned to explain the lot to him, damn the consequences. "For either of us," she murmured under her breath.

The next half an hour passed with Tonks explaining what Amortentia is, and how it could affect him. Harry relayed that his feelings for Ginny had waned as the summer progressed, eventually fading to what he felt was a comfortable friendship. He liked her well enough, but it just seemed odd – she was the sister of his best mate. On top

of it all, she saw him as the Boy-Who-Lived, an idol, a hero. She'd said as much at their last meeting, leaving King's Cross to each go their separate ways.

Harry, as he explained to Tonks, really despised anything that took away from him as a person, and labeled him like Voldemort. The Boy-Who-Lived moniker was a sore point to him, and there was likely little chance he'd ever normally had started a relationship with the young Weasley, after the way she seemed to follow him about like a puppy.

"Do you think she was spiking your butterbeer with the potion?" Tonks asked levelly, leaning back against the Ash tree, having foregone the bench for something more comfortable. She cocked her head to the side to see Harry considering her question carefully, which to Tonks wasn't a good sign.

He really couldn't see Ginny doing something like that. Harry also couldn't see himself being more than just friends with the girl, but apparently, both had happened, in some fashion. "I don't know. Maybe, but I don't understand why she would. Then again, if Dumbledore is checking the mail, it could even be him. "

Sighing, the young Auror shook her head slowly. "There were rumors, you know. Some pretty harsh, from what I heard from mum, about Molly Prewett. Before she married Arthur." Gathering herself, Tonks looked up to the star her cousin was named for, searching for strength. "They said she used Amortentia to snare him. The Weasley line wasn't always stretched so thin, as far as money goes, you see. Not far back, they'd married into the Blacks even."

"Blacks and Weasleys married?" Harry boggled at the idea, unable to reconcile it.

"I actually believe it was Arthur's mother, that was a Black to be honest. Cedrella? I think that was it. She was blasted off the wall for it, or during the first war as a result. I'm not sure. Mum doesn't talk about her home, from when she was growing up much," Tonks recollected, trying to place the various tales she'd been told by her mother, Sirius and her own observation of the huge, sprawling Black Family Tree within Grimmauld.

Harry simply stared at the grass between his feet, feeling the comforting coolness of the night, and it's chill in the ground seemingly try to comfort his distress. Could Ginny, or Molly even, have tried to lace the food and drink they sent to him with a love potion? If that were true...

Who could Harry trust? Dumbledore, the Weasleys... both parties he'd felt, up to recently, were without question. But now... Sighing, Harry gave in to gravity and flopped back on the grass with a muffled thump.

"Knut for your thoughts, Harry?" Tonks asked, leaning over and blocking the stars with her dark blue hair.

Blinking up at her quietly, he none the less smiled as her hair rotated colors, possibly at random, possibly just to cheer him up. "Just thinking. I should leave this place, and soon. It's... I'm just not safe here."

Tonks seemed to consider his words, but gave nothing away. "Where would you go?"

"I can't go anywhere." Laughing quietly, Harry sighed and motioned for Tonks to move so he could stand. "There's no place I can go, that I can shake loose Dumbledore's shackles. No place that is hidden from him, Voldemort and the Ministry." Smiling over his shoulder, he simply shrugged, walking back to the Dursleys with a heavy heart. "I'm trapped here far more than I even thought."

Watching him walk, willingly to his prison, Tonks turned and sobbed into her cloak quietly. Forgotten were the vitamin and nutrient potions she'd brought, as well as the sheafs of copied research and notes about an ancient book, all waiting in her pack. Forgotten was her patrol, she knew it was late, but she felt it more important to talk with Harry, than go for a pointless stroll along the lanes. "It's just not fair for him. Not fair at all."

Harry took his time going back to his room, stopping off in the kitchen to get an apple, which he finished by the time he made it to his room.

He was just pulling out his knife to undo the locks and go back inside, when a bright flash of red caught the edge of his vision, and he knew no more.

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Arabella Figg had a fairly simple, quiet life. The only real commotion was when the various wizards of the Order used her home to Floo or as a common room for when they worked, guarding Harry. She had a simple house, with simple furnishings. The only real complication she'd had was during the last summer, when that poor boy had to summon a Patronus to drive off those Dementors.

And then, Nymphadora Tonks burst into the house, sputtering something about spells and missing and ran over half her cats on the way to the Floo.

"Twelve Grimmauld Place," the twitchy Auror shouted, barely waiting for the fire to turn green before shoving her head into it. "Emergency, Harry's gone missing, and there was spells cast. Get the Order here, now!" Tonks then pulled out her mirror and did the same, setting it to announce to all other Order members the message she'd sent to Grimmauld.

Nearly two hours, an exhaustive search, and even the use of Veritaserum on the Dursleys yielded no clues, beyond what lay in Harry's room.

"I have trace of a forced side-along Apparation, inside the room." Moody waved his wand again and growled under his breath. "No signature."

Kingsley nodded, letting loose a sigh as he recorded all the magical signatures in the house. "Only things in the last twenty-four hours that register are... Invisibility cloak use, an unlocking charm device, wizarding photos, a wizard's trinket – have to guess that to be the miniature Firebolt there, a charmed letter, owl missives, an unsigned stunner, unsigned shrinking charm, unsigned packing charm and that

Apparation." Uncharacteristically for the tall Auror, he kicked out at the door frame in frustration, upsetting a small fall of dust from the jamb.

Moody came by, thumping along with his cane and resting a hand along the other Aurors shoulder. "We'll find him, Shack. No worries on that. Where can he be hidden that Dumbledore can't find? Or us?" Sighing, the scarred man turned to look at the room one last time. "Seems whoever took him, meant for him to be comfortable at least. Took a few of his things, I reckon."

Nodding, Kingsley sighed and motioned the two to leave, and with a series of cracks from Apparating, the two returned to Grimmauld Place.

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Albus Dumbledore, present in a great midnight blue robe and his customary glasses stoically surveyed the darkened, gloomy room and it's occupants. The kitchen of 12 Grimmauld Place was cramped, but tonight it seemed even more unpleasant. Addressing the collected Order, the emergency meeting having been called just after Tonks's alert, the Headmaster began, "This meeting of the Order of the Phoenix shall come to order... As you're all aware, young Harry Potter has gone missing, in such a way that suggests foul play."

Molly Weasley wailed quietly at this, having hoped beyond reason that the young man she's all but adopted to be simply sneaking about or stretching his legs. Wringing her hands and collapsing into her husband's shoulder, she broke down finally. Her sons that were present gravitated to their matron, even if silent, offering their support by being nearby.

Other members of the Order reacted in different ways. Hagrid looked tired, sad and fell silent, his eyes distant. The various Ministry members all conferred one to another, speculating. Moody, Tonks, Shacklebolt and Lupin converged and sat near one another, but didn't speak, knowing full well soon they'd be called on to take the search

outside of the Order. The Professors, minus Lupin, stayed by Albus and simply looked lost and worried. Snape was the single exception to every rule, sitting alone and looking pensive and confused, which worried some present even more than his usual surly demeanor.

"Settle down everyone, I understand your concerns... but we cannot make any progress with this chaos," gently chiding the Order, his gaze took in each person's pain and worry, offering them his own in return. In a few moments the many attending settled into a tense quiet, waiting. "Very well. Now, as Nymphadora was on duty this night, let us hear her account."

Stifling the grimace that her given name caused, the young Auror stepped forward and went into report mode, her memory clearing and relaying details of the night as she recalled them. Those familiar with the Ministry and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were familiar with this, being trained to either dictate as she did, or record from Aurors if called on to do so.

"At a quarter till 11pm I arrived at Privet drive by Apparation and checked in with the patrol station, at the Figg residence. There was no unusual traffic, and one unfamiliar vehicle that was identified as belonging to the fiancée of a local teen. Threat value was negligible. At five minutes till 11pm I arrived on site and and relieved Podmore, who gave me a brief account of the day.

"Recount needed?" Tonks waited for a signal to recount Podmore's report, and receiving a negative, continued her own, "Principal was sitting on-

"Excuse me, his name is Harry," Molly Weasley, cut in, with a strangled sob to punctuate her words. Tonks turned a distant eye to the grieving woman, and simply continued her account.

"-sitting on the bench, located in the back garden. He has numerous papers in his hands and was apparently somewhat nervous, anxious or disturbed." Pausing for breath, the young Auror was cut off before she'd uttered another syllable by Molly again.

"And you didn't approach him? What kind of-

"Weasley, our guard assignments were outlined strictly as observation and patrol," Tonks ground out, annoyed at having her report interrupted again. "We aren't authorized to contact, support or otherwise interfere with the Prin – with Harry."

Arthur physically restrained his spouse as the woman seemed intent on jumping over the table and throttling the insolent Auror. "Why you useless, insensitive..."

Tonks turned to Dumbledore and held up her wand with a tight-lipped expression, "Sir?"

Scandalized, Molly sat down hard and looked back and forth between the Headmaster and the Auror. "You wouldn't..." she trailed off as Albus gave her a gentle shake of his head.

"We must maintain ourselves, if we are to overcome this," he reminded them all, looking at everyone but Molly pointedly. "Now, as much as I applaud Nymphadora for her professionalism in her work, this is a delicate, and different case..."

Turning to the room, Tonks stepped back, letting the dictation mode fade from her features. "I know, Dumbledore. I wanted to, often. But our orders were specific-"

"And open to interpretation, if needed," the aged wizard interjected, quietly, yet loud enough to carry. Tonks looked appropriately abashed. Sighing, the Headmaster looked over his Order and tried to think of what could have happened to young Potter. "Were there any signs of heavy violence?"

Moody shook his head, looking for all the world older than usual. "No sir, nothing but a light scuffing on the floor by his door. Here's the record of the signatures from the house." The sheet of parchment, recording all the magical impressions from the vicinity of Harry's room passed to the Headmaster. "Damned locks were still done as well. Everything in his room was still in place, and apparently he'd let his owl out to hunt. She's yet to return."

Brows rising slightly, Albus considered these last words quietly. "Indeed."

"Yes sir. If we see her, we'll bring her here. In addition, it looks like he was studying his school texts, poor lad," Kingsley added, shaking his head. "Must have been rereading those same books all summer. Wish I'd dropped off some old texts I had for him now."

Smiling sadly, Dumbledore regarded the tall Auror with a slight glint to his eye, "Ah, hindsight. Well, perhaps when he's back safe at home, we can think of such pleasantness. But now," he turned, expression going stern and hard. "We must locate and return Harry to safety. I want everyone to keep an ear to the ground about this; do not let anything that could be relevant go uninvestigated."

Rising to his full height, Dumbledore shook his head sadly, "Nothing else of interest is relevant tonight. Let us be about our tasks. Nymphadora, please wait outside a moment, and Severus? I'll speak with you a moment, please." The other Order members filed, or in Molly's case, were helped out of the room, with only Severus Snape staying behind with the Headmaster.

When the door had closed, Albus rounded on the Potion Master, his blue eyes glaring faintly like fiendfyre as he grated his words behind clenched teeth, "This is why you are still free, Severus! Why were we not warned? What has Voldemort done with Harry?"

At a loss, the lank-haired man drew back from the Headmaster's glare, taken aback by the sudden rage he was witness to. "I-I didn't know, Headmaster. The Dark Lord mentioned nothing about attacking the boy's home, in fact unless I've lost favor with him and am no longer to be trusted, he doesn't know it's location."

"I pray... I pray you are correct Severus. In that you are still in his favor, and that he wasn't involved," his eyes still hard and cold, the older wizard loomed over the professor, Snape's eyes dilating with fear. "For if you have lost your use to me, then he shall be all that can give you shelter. Remember this."

Seemingly dismissed, Snape turned away and made a brisk path to the door. As he opened the portal, a final word caught his attention, "And that, without the Order, even he won't suffer your presence." Closing the door behind him, the Potions Master stood in the common room of 12 Grimmauld looking uncharacteristically shaken and drawn.

Tonight, no one would harass him, or press him due to his history or methods. It was plain enough to see he was already in a bad way. Tonks watched him go with a sense of dread, knowing she was next to speak to the Headmaster. Deciding to get it done sooner as opposed to later, she stepped into the kitchen and cleared her throat, announcing her presence to the man, steeping tea at the table.

"Come in, Nymphadora," Albus beckoned, not looking up from his tea. When she rounded the table to his side, he held up a stilling hand. "I understand you were on patrol when Harry went missing, tonight."

Swallowing, Tonks nodded once, "Yes sir, as we're supposed to once the shift has gone on for a brief time."

"Tell me then, why it is you were on patrol, approximately one hour later than usual?"

Tonks sighed and looked down, shaking her head. "I have no excuse."

Weary was the word she'd use for this day, Tonks mused to herself. "I was not searching for one. Merely pointing out the reasons for what I must do."

Wary, her instincts told her to run, yet the Auror training she'd spent three years suffering in refused to let her. "Sir?"

"It is with a heavy heart that I must dismiss you from the Order. Following tonight, you will no longer be able to enter or even remember the location to this building. It sadly, must be done. They will want someone to blame for this tragedy, and as I see it, you will have to be the one." Looking up with weary eyes, Dumbledore drew his wand and pointed it at the young Auror, who stiffened in reflex.

"I am also afraid, that I must strike from your memory the members of the Order itself." At her rebellious glare he smiled, sadly. "Oh you shall remember them, but not that they are of the Order. Forgive me, Nymphadora, but this... this is for the greater good. Obliviate."

Tonks came aware blinking in her own flat, a cup of lukewarm tea in her hand. Setting it gently down she stretched, trying to ease taut muscles. Squinting at the seemingly sudden light from her kitchen, the young Auror went about putting away her neglected tea, and readying herself for sleep. Tomorrow was a Tuesday, and she had some sleep to... to.

"Why am I up so late when I have to work tomorrow?" She mused, looking over her flat with a wary eye. Something seemed out of place. She shuddered to think that something was her. Tonks was an Auror for a reason, and despite her sometimes clumsiness, she completed her training as one of the youngest recruits in a long time. Those accolades don't come cheaply, or idly.

Walking to her door, she pulled the small slip of paper off the jamb, camouflaged to look like so much plastered wood. "I forgot my milk money," she murmured the passphrase to it, watching the scroll expand and give her a record of all the spells and magical devices activated in her home over the last twenty-four hours. The list was rather normal until...

12:30am, Pensieve activity

12:35am, Apparation (inbound), unsigned – ward access granted

12:37am, two Apparation (outbound), one unsigned

2:48am, side-along Apparation (inbound) ward access granted

2:48am, unknown ward access spell

2:48am, unknown signature masking spell

2:49am, unknown charm

2:51am, Apparation (outbound) ward access granted

Tonks stared at the list with something akin to horror. "What's... going on?" Scanning her house, she pulled her wand, but remembering the list and her own paranoia, went to her den and the desk there. Atop her writing desk, sat what appeared to be a muggle pencil sharpener

– Tonks even bought some pencils to keep nearby just to make the illusion believable. Of course it wasn't a pencil sharpener, as she jammed her wand tip-first into the thing, eliciting a rather loud squawk. Her eyes narrowed and she rapped on the thing twice, which caused it to rumble a moment then ding like a bell.

"Trace charm removed... now to figure out what the hell happened here," waving her wand briefly, she accessed her wards directly, and watched as Dumbledore appeared then seemed to disappear. "Sneaky... alright. Lets try another way."

Adjust her own vision slightly, calling on her Metamorph skills, she meshed her vision to that of her wards, forcing herself to see the magic directly. "Ow. This never gets easier... there we go."

Tonks released her altered vision and rubbed furiously at her temples. "Bloody trick always gives me a headache. So, persistent memory charm, lovely. Who or what am I supposed to be forgetting..." finding the small metal focus of the spell, a twisted bronze Knut, she vanished it along with the dust on top of that bookshelf. "Seems to have been the last of the surprises."

Tonks shuffled into her bathroom, and opened her muggle medicine cabinet. Her father being muggleborn was a benefit in a lot of ways, to her line of work. The paranoia muggles put into all things aided her immeasurably in being an Auror. Rifling through the odd outdated and sometimes empty makeup bottle, and a few that contained potions of various sorts, she pulled out a simple black plastic disk.

"Pensieve access huh? Here's hoping I know what's going on..." Opening the simple compact, Tonks sighed and looked at the empty space a puff would reside. In its place, a second mirror sat, this one appearing somewhat cloudy. Speaking a pass phrase, silvery strands of memory pooled on its surface, which she bound up and gathered with the tip of her wand. Placing the tip to her temple, she shuddered and shook for long moments, as the memories rewound themselves into her mind.

With a deep breath, Tonks opened her eyes and snapped the compact shut. "Old fucker needs to realize who he's dealing with,"

she murmured viciously, collecting a small duffel which she packed with necessities, shrunken to save space. As she packed, she pulled out two letters, each of which she sent via muggle means, knowing that their recipients would have access to such. Having expected this event for some time, she grinned at how this would play out.

"Loyalty is a finicky thing, Albus. Be careful who you piss off," grinning maliciously, the Auror stretched again, looking longingly at her bedroom door. "Later," she murmured, nodding.

Finally, she pulled on her own invisibility cloak, not the one the Ministry issued, as well as some dueling robes, enchanted to deflect many minor curses. Packing had been brief, but she had started days ago, after all.

Her apartment looked very tidy, so much so one would doubt it was lived in... snickering, Tonks took one final look around, and closed the door behind her, a note to her landlord with her door key in the envelope, slid under his door. One final thing to do, she banished and undid her wards, smiling sadly at all the work that had gone into them. With a jaunty tune on her lips, she hummed as she erased the last three years of her life from the wizarding world.

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Harry's world was a kaleidoscope of headache, sore jaw and what felt like cotton being slowly pulled out of his ears. "Whu..."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter," a cool voice utterly devoid of inflection answered him, seemingly from inside his own head. Snapping his gaze up from where his chin had rested on his chest, Harry's vision swam as his headache raged all the more fiercely for the sudden action.

Looking around the small room, as it did appear to be such, rather than a dank cave he'd feared it'd be, Harry noted the utter lack of any defining... anything. The table was plain metal. Same color as the

floor. His chair. The walls, the lights, the large obviously one-way glass and even his interrogator, all were the same color.

Harry decided he hated steel gray at that moment. More so even than Killing Curse green.

"You may notice that you're bound to that chair. That is for your own protection, till the interview process is complete," the... being, in the gray cloak spoke, and for the life of him, Harry had no idea if it was male or female. Its tone was perfect neutral, and he could see neither sign of broad shoulders, or breasts from what he could tell of the person.

Harry felt at his jaw with his tongue and started, stifling a curse. Whatever happened between being at the Dursleys and where he was, it had dislodged a tooth... "Where am I?" he asked quietly, knowing no one would answer truthfully, if at all.

The figure across from him straitened, then seemed to shrug. "Somewhere that none who know you, can find you."

Sighing, Harry tested his bonds and found them strong, as well as simple. He'd could be kept here a long time before they'd need to move him. Banging his head against the chair that held him in place, he glared at his captor, or one of his captors he had to admit, and waited.

"Quite done testing our hospitality? Good." The question was asked without pause, and the figure answered in the same breath. Reaching into the robes it wore, the figure brought out a folder and a number of pictures. Laying them out, Harry noticed they were normal wizarding pictures, all of people he knew, or had people in the pictures with him. He stifled a moan as he realized almost all the Order, and all the DA were pictured. "Identify those pictured," the voice commanded.

"No."

Smiling the figure shrugged again and pulled a wand. "If you refuse, I pick one, and either they die, or you die. Which shall it be?"

"Leave them alone – kill me."

Pausing, the figure nodded once and removed the pictures, much to Harry's confusion. As he watched, the figure pulled a single picture from his stack, and Harry groaned audibly this time. "What is your relationship to this woman?"

"She's a friend, we talk," He grated, watching himself and Tonks sit and chat on the bench at 4 Privet Drive. "What do you want with me?"

The figure shrugged again, and seemed to settle back in the cloak a bit further. "We have need of you. As for details; in time all will be made clear." The figure tapped the image of Tonks impatiently. "What else of this one."

Harry managed to collect the saliva to spit at the hooded figure, only to have a shield snap into place and his efforts wasted. "Never," he snarled, settling back in his chair with a rattle of metal on metal.

Nodding, the figure seemed to grow thoughtful, before it leaned closer, seeming to inspect him. "We know of your Prophecy. We know of your past, of your friends, of your Order. We know your hand alone, as it says, will defeat the Dark Lord. We would ask your help, in understanding how, and when, his downfall shall be."

Fairly goggling at the figure, Harry could barely put the words to mind, that this wasn't one of Voldemort's followers or Death Eaters. Assessing the room he was in Harry had to admit, it didn't seem at all like something Voldemort would ascribe to. "Who are you people?" he asked again, calmer this time.

"We were never here, and you didn't see us."

Blinking, Harry looked down but his head snapped back up almost in the same motion. "Unspeakables?"

The figure nodded, raising a pale, thin hand to ward off his questions. "Understand. We are not part of your Ministry. The Department of Mysteries is autonomous. We must be, as we are far too integrated to muggle observation, and the maintenance of the Veil and the transits

to Azkaban. We are the Ferryman. The facilitators. We are also those that are called on to do, that which wasn't done."

Brow furrowing at this last claim, Harry leveled a curious expression at his captor. "That last bit, what do you mean?"

"The Unspeakables are also those that the Ministry comes to, when things that must be done, cannot be claimed. It allows the Minister to maintain the moral right."

"I don't understand. So you're part of the Ministry, but not? But you work for them, doing things they can't claim?" Shaking his head, Harry simply closed his eyes, hoping this was all a nightmare somehow. "Why me?"

"To answer the first question, we do so because we must. We are bound to our duty, and cannot deviate. The Ministry requires what we offer, and this is the agreement. In time... it shall become clearer." The figure seemed to collect itself after this, and continued. "As for your second question. It was because you needed to be here." Another photo was produced and the figure tapped it impatiently. "This man. What is he to you?"

Restraining himself, Harry took a deep breath before continuing. "A chess player. Manipulative, possibly maliciously so. He's too good to be caught out. I seem to have trouble escaping him," Harry admitted, staring at the calm face of Albus Dumbledore, from the picture.

The figure nodded, and produced a single sheet of parchment, and a blood quill. "If you would like us to protect you from him, and from the spies of Voldemort, sign this. You will not be admitted to the ranks of the Unspeakables, but we will ward you. Offer you training to assist in your task, and point you in the direction of more training, for your goal."

Harry sat incredulous, apparent now that all the other questions were simply a kind of test. "Why," he asked, shaking his head. "Why pick me?"

The cloaked figure seemed to draw it self taller, looming over the young man. "Because, some of us believe in you, without need of a Prophecy."

Cowed, Harry straitened slowly as the figure waited. "And if I refuse...?"

"We send you back to Dumbledore."

Heaving a sigh, Harry motioned to his hand and the bonds were released almost immediately. "Where do I sign?"

The figure indicated the few places he had to sign the magically binding contracts, ones familiar to him already. "A Fidelis, and a Geis. Well, in for a Knut..." sliding the paperwork, now signed across the table, he waited as the cloaked Unspeakable looked over them, signing as well carefully. "Now what?"

"Now you get to unpack, and I show you around the digs," a familiar voice chirped from beneath the hood.

Harry peered closely, as the figure reached up suddenly, pulling the hood back and breaking the obscuring spell on her heart shaped face. "Wotcher Harry!"

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, slipped back into the blessed darkness of unconsciousness, with one small thought echoing quietly to keep him company. "Damned woman will be the death of me."

Chapter Three.

Only solitary men know the full joys of friendship. Others have their family; but to a solitary and an exile his friends are everything.

– Warren Gamaliel Harding

Harry grumbled as he shifted, wondering why he was dreaming of summer while still in school. Eyes still closed, he listened for the familiar sounds of the tower dormitory; Ron's snores, Dean's restless shifting, but only silence greeted him. The comfortable bed was a dead giveaway though, so figuring maybe everyone was just having an early day, he burrowed back under his blanket and tried to recapture the bliss of a dreamless sleep.

"I knew Gryffindors were lazy, but this is ridiculous," a feminine voice lilted at him from the darkness beyond his eyes, causing him to start and jump up to the head of the bed.

Glaring around wildly without his glasses, all Harry could make out was a vaguely blue blur atop a larger gray one, barely discernible from the rest of the slate-gray room. "Tonks? That you?"

"Yessir, here, they're on this side. No bedside table per se in here." The blur moved to his right, and pressed the familiar shape of his glasses into his hand. "Now that you're properly awake, do you remember the rather important conversation we had before you decided to check out on me?"

Harry adjusted his glasses onto his face and peered at Tonks, trying to keep himself from glaring. "Oh, you mean the part where you kidnapped me, brought me to..." blinking a moment, Harry sighed. "Get back to that in a moment. Kidnapped, interrogated, and then had me agree to taking an Oath of secrecy about the Unspeakables and Department of Mysteries." Tapping his chin, he looked about the room before leveling his glare back to Tonks, "I think that about sums it up."

Smirking, the young Auror shook her head. "Well, at least Hermione rubbed off on you some." When Harry bristled at the snide comment,

she held up a hand to still him. "Just listen a bit, alright? I'll explain some things, then you can dress me down.

"First off, I'm not an Unspeakable. I'm just an Auror, but due to the contamination of the Ministry proper after Vol.. Volde – You-Know-Who's return, the Unspeakables approached me, saying they needed an inside person. Someone to help them figure out who was and wasn't on the up-and-up," shrugging a bit, she settled onto the end of his bed and continued. "I was already spying for the Order, so figured I could put in a bigger shower with the extra cash."

Mouth working silently, Harry just shook his head. "So you're a spy for some other... hold on. What are the Unspeakables anyway? That explanation of yours was really vague."

Tonks ran a hand through her hair and shrugged slightly, "To be honest? I'm not fully sure myself. You noticed me signing those forms too right?" When Harry nodded an affirmative, she went on, "I was agreeing to the same. If you'd not agreed, I'd have been Obliviated, again, and sent... well back out."

"Wait a minute. Again? They Obliviated you?" Harry was livid at this, having dealt with Lockhart his entire second year at Hogwarts. The foppish fool had nearly managed to do the same to him, but for Ron's broken wand, Harry would have forgotten that entire year in all likelihood.

Tonks waved her hands, trying to calm Harry, "No, no they didn't. Sit," waving her wand, Harry found himself quite bound and settled where he was. Growling under his breath he struggled slightly. "Stay... good." Smirking to herself, Tonks shrugged off the daggers Harry was glaring at her and went on with her story. "When you told me about your problems, with Dumbledore and the rest, I started thinking. I had been working with the Unspeakables for a while by then, like a few others that are basically Ministry liaisons. Bode I think is one.

"Anyway, they had approached me after the Department of Mysteries battle, while I was holed up in St. Mungo's, and asked me about what it was all over." Pausing, Tonks took a moment to collect her thoughts. "I guess they put things in perspective for me. They took me in a bit

deeper, told me about your Prophecy, and asked that I keep an eye on the Order as well."

Shaking his head slightly, Harry tried to take in all that Tonks was saying, but kept coming up short when it was revealed she was the spy among them. "So... I take it Fudge knows more about the Order than he's letting on."

"Him? Oh Merlin no." Laughing, she stood and poured a cup of water from the pitcher, bringing it to Harry. She unbound him, now that things seemed to have calmed, and they sat amicably. "The Unspeakables have more animosity against him than You-Know-Who."

"I thought you said they work for the Ministry though?" Confused, Harry sighed, realizing all the knots he was trying to follow were simply giving him a headache.

Grimacing, Tonks shook her head slowly. "Oh, no. They're separate. Just think of them for now like a separate department under... the Queen."

Harry raised a brow at her hesitation, "Are you sure about that, Tonks?"

Laughing, she stood and pulled Harry up after her. "Let's have some lunch, get some tea and a bit of toast into us, and we'll get it all straitened out. It's a long story, and one maybe I shouldn't be the one to tell."

Shrugging he realized that was likely all he was going to get from the Auror and Harry followed Tonks from the nondescript room. Noticing he was passing more of the same, a veritable hive of blank gray rooms, his curiosity peaked, "Where is this place?" He tried to place the feeling of where he was, and failed each time something seemed familiar.

"Well, you remember that Locked Room in the Department of Mysteries last year?" At Harry's nod, she smirked, "Well, unlike what Dumbledore would have you believe, it's not 'love' behind the door."

Snickering a bit, Harry shook his head slowly, "So he has no idea then?"

"Hardly. For the most part, only the practical side of the Department is visible to the Ministry proper as I understand. The rooms you know of, for instance." They turned a corner at the end of the hallway, coming out under a stone archway into a larger room. Here, numerous other gray-cloaked figures seemed to be meeting, moving and making their way about. Harry boggled at the number of them, till a slight figure in a robe moved forward and bowed to him solemnly.

"Heir Potter, it is our pleasure to grant you the protection of the Shrouded Isle. My duty as one of the Whispered is to assist and help those under the auspices of the Unspeakables," so saying, the hooded and robed young woman went silent, standing by the stunned Boy-Who-Lived and his equally gobsmacked companion.

Harry looked to Tonks, who to his anxiety was simply boggling at the slight form before him. "Ah, well... thank you?" Unsure how to proceed, Harry extended his hand to young woman, if the voice were any indication. To his growing horror, the cloaked figure took his hand and bowed over it deeply again. "You don't have to do that..."

The figure simply stood after her show of deference and gestured to the room beyond, "Here are the commons. Until we key you to Murmur's Hall completely, please restrict yourself to this room, and the hall you've just left. If you are allowed, I shall show you the library, once we've enjoyed a repast." Without pause, she moved forward and seemingly toward a corner of the room, housing a small depression people seemed to be moving in and out of steadily.

Tonks shrugged and moved after, speeding her steps to keep up with their guide. "Great, Department of Mysteries indeed. Understatement of the year," muttering under his breath, Harry followed suit, trying not to lose sight of the small form of their guide in the confusing press of similarly cloaked figures.

Much to the two visitor's surprise, the cafeteria was well stocked, if simple in fare. Few complex dishes were in appearance, as most of the food could be considered finger food or fruit. Harry found the change simple yet satisfying. "This isn't what I imagined the Ministry-bound elves to be serving, I kind of like the difference."

Their guide stilled, and seemed to look at him steadily for a moment. "Excuse me?"

As Harry glanced around, he felt the pressure of a number of eyes, as he sputtered and tried to reword his comment, "Ah, I mean... at Hogwarts, the kitchens are run by house-elves. Is that not the case here?"

The young woman shook her head, the hood of the cloak relaying the motion. "Here, we do not use the Law-bound to do tasks. We of the Whispered, whom make up this place you call the Department of Mysteries, have no servants." The words were said quietly, but both Tonks and Harry sat back with the feeling behind them.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, not knowing the customs and habits of the odd people that seemed so different from the rest of wizarding Britain. The moment seemed to have passed, as their guide picked up after a minute, describing the daily routines about the Murmur's Hall, which comprised the areas they were in. Harry gathered the Hall was the entirety of this area, broken into its three parts.

He'd awoken in the dormitories, living space and rooms for the Unspeakables and their guests that had access to the Locked Room. Harry guessed that counting himself and Tonks, there were currently two such guests. The rooms were mostly muggle, no magic at all to be had. Harry had seen little that spoke of magic within the Hall so far, so the fact that the entire place was settled inside the Ministry for Magic itself surprised him more than a little.

Where he and Tonks were currently dining and speaking with their guide, was the commons. As it was described, this area was the public room for the Hall, where people spoke and chatted, socialized and met informally. The cafeteria was here, and there was a shift

breakdown it was revealed, that had each Unspeakable presently residing in the Hall working there at some point.

Unseen to them, and leading off in the opposite direction from the entrance to the dorms, was the library. Here, most of the research and notation done in the Department of Mysteries occurred. Harry had wondered what kind of recording situation was present, as when the battle outside had waged, there was precious little actual office space to speak of. As it turned out, research into the mechanics and the fulfillment of Prophecies took up a large portion of the libraries work. This made sense, as quite a lot of the floor space Harry had seen in the outer Department had been devoted to the Hall of Prophecy.

"For the time being, please restrict yourselves to the dormitories and commons. Some texts in the library are not for the eyes of the uninitiated, or untrained," the young woman explained. "In time, when we understand you a bit more, we shall lift this restriction. This will be our help to you, as we agreed in the Geis binding you to secrecy."

Harry nodded that he understood but held up his hand, stalling any further words from their guide. "Just a moment, if you please. When you met us, you called me 'Heir Potter'," pausing to gauge the robed figure's reaction, he simply saw a small nod. Shrugging he continued, "You can call me Harry, I'd actually prefer that to any title."

A few moments passed before the figure seemed to bow her head slightly. "Then we shall call you Harry."

Tonks watched this with mild curiosity, "You get used to the odd way they handle names, eventually. Took me a while to be someone other than 'Auror', something they called me since the beginning."

Turning to the hooded figure, Harry asked a question that had bothered him since they'd entered the commons, "What is your name, then?" Harry inquired, watching the figure seem to shift uncomfortably.

Finally, their guide seemed to slump, and rose stiffly. "Follow me, please," she said, barely in a whisper. Harry sat, somewhat confused

as the young woman's answer was not what he'd expected. Again, Tonks was fast behind the cloaked figure as Harry sped to keep up.

He found the two of them turning the corner into the dormitories, and Harry sighed as he got the feeling he'd traded the Dursleys and his locked room for a bland, empty version of a holiday at Hogwarts. As he pulled up alongside Tonks, the robed woman guiding them stopped and gestured to a room along the Hall.

"This will be your standing quarters. If there is something you need beyond the present amenities, please note it on the parchment, and leave it on the table near the door." Opening the door to the room, she gestured inside and the two went in, inspecting the lay of the quarters. Without another word, the woman slipped out, the door closing of it's own weight behind them.

"Hold on! You didn't... dammit." Harry stared down the hallway, looking either way after the cloaked figure, but saw no one in the hall. Turning with a sigh he closed the door again and stared at the far wall, feeling almost as lost as the day after Sirius died.

Padding around the room anxiously, Tonks looked at Harry and waited for him to ask the question she knew should be asked, sooner as opposed to later. When it seemed his preoccupation wasn't passing, she huffed and sat down on the corner of the large bed. "Oh, Harry?"

Snapping out of his rather annoyed reverie, Harry took in Tonks's expression and winced. "What's up, Tonks?"

She gestured at the room, shaking her head slowly. "See something missing?"

Harry scanned the walls, seeing them typically bare and of the same slate color as everything else he'd seen. The table by the wall was large, doubling as a work area and desk he figured, as the pair of chairs by it may have suggested. Their things – his trunk and her bags, were arranged by what seemed to be closets. A small door to the side provided a loo, so that question was answered. Light seemed keyed to them asking for more or less, and was provided

invisibly, which seemed to bother him less than he would have assumed it would, a few years ago. "Not sure, what am I not seeing?"

Rolling her eyes, she tossed a pillow at him, growling slightly, "How about the other bed?"

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Harry Potter, supposed savior of the wizarding world, lay with his head on the somewhat lumpy pillow, his back cramping at the hardness of the floor. "Look, I said I was sorry. I wasn't paying attention, and then she was gone."

Tonks's hand flopped into view over the edge of the room's only bed, expressing her view of the situation eloquently to the young wizard.

Sighing, Harry just shifted and tried to get comfortable on the hard floor. "Tonks, will you try to explain how I ended up here? If you're not keen on sleep yet at least," hoping some conversation would calm the Auror, Harry sat up and lay his arms on the mattress, meeting the eyes of his unlikely room mate.

With a mumble, Tonks scrunched up her nose and groaned. "Yeah, I can never sleep right in a new place," patting the bed beside her, she scooted over and up, resting against the headboard. "C'mon, hard to talk to you down there."

Warily Harry sat on the bed, staying above the coverlet which Tonks was still under. "You mentioned something earlier that worried me. Something about being Obliviated."

"Ah, right. The Order meeting I don't remember," chuckling a bit, she stretched and settled back against her pillow, a sardonic smile painted along her features. "After the first few times I'd visited you, I was pretty sure that something had to be done. Not sure what, but I had that feeling, you know?" When Harry nodded, she grinned and continued her tale, "Well, considering the Unspeakables wanted me to spy on the Order like they did with the Aurors, I had started to get

suspicious. Not of them, you see.

"I always wondered what Albus was doing, keeping Snape in the Order. That, and the tales about your family, those horrible Dursley people, kind of tipped the scales." Closing her eyes, she shrugged, voice lowering as she devoted herself to memory. "Sirius's note to me clinched it, honestly. He told me how Albus had practically made him a prisoner in his own home, with that horrible elf Kreacher to keep him company."

"I still can't believe that. I mean, I know it happened, but poor Sirius... twelve years in Azkaban, then he had to stay in a home he hated for another," Glaring at the darkness of the ceiling, Harry tried to banish the memory of Sirius as he'd appeared, the first time they'd met. Gaunt, driven, half mad with rage and sadness.

Tonks reached out, taking Harry's hand and giving it a small squeeze. "I know. Trust me I know. I tried to get Dumbledore to let him be, to give him some freedom, but it was as if he were afraid of Sirius. I think he really expected him to try and resume being your Godfather."

"It would seem to counter his plans for me, having a Marauder loose as my mentor and guardian," the bitterness in Harry's voice reminded Tonks of Sirius, as they'd talked after her few failed attempts to gain his freedom.

"It was those times I talked to Dumbledore that really changed my mind about him, and the Order," she recounted, settling her story to the rhythm of her breathing. "We did nothing active, after the Ministry, other than set up guard shifts for you.

"Odd, isn't it? Only you. None of the others at the battle were guarded. Do you know how many of the Order have fought against one Death Eater?"

Harry shook his head silently, a chill settling in his stomach. "I'd hope most... considering what their goal is."

"Kingsley, Moody, me, Dumbledore, Lupin. Less than your DA roster that were there," a derisive laugh escaped her lips at the idea. "We were to protect you. How foolish, eh?"

"I suppose, when you look at it like that. But I've never faced battles, or fought wars. Just the odd plan and scheme of some of his loyal followers, or Voldemort himself." Yawning hugely, Harry, shook his head, "I obviously need to work on my tactics, as I was grossly outmaneuvered here, last year."

"You did well, Harry," Tonks assured him, voice soft in the quiet of the room. "Sirius was proud. You could see it in how he fought with you. You gave him something grand that night, that I know satisfied and let him go into the Veil, if not ready, then at least content."

"You showed him you could fight. That you could survive, and with that, you showed him that at the end of this war, you'd be able to finally live." Reaching over, she pulled Harry into an embrace, his quiet tears not lost to her. "You showed him that he left nothing truly undone."

His heart finally able to break, Harry collapsed into the tears he had been holding back so long. He could practically see the night play out again. How Sirius laughed! How could he not see it then, that he was happy, at last. Harry had felt it was from being couped up in the stuffy old rooms of Grimmauld, finally out and free that had set him alight so.

He'd never considered it was being with him, dueling alongside him much like his father had so long ago, that made him smile so. He'd given him that final assurance, a bittersweet gift.

"I can fight," Harry murmured to the darkness, his head half veiled in the dark blue drape of Tonks's hair. "I will fight. I will win. I won't let him down."

Tonks let her own tears fall, nodding as Harry made his vow to the darkness. "I know. I believe in you, Harry. And I'll be there with you, till this is over."

It was long minutes before the two separated, smiling and awkward from their grief and comforting of one another. "You never answered my question you know," the young wizard chided, laughing quietly. "About being Obliviated, I mean."

"Oh! Right... we got a bit sidetracked there didn't we?" Laughing, Tonks smiled and rubbed at her somewhat puffy eyes. "Well, like I'd said, I was questioning things. Finally it just became too much, I knew that eventually the help I was giving you would be found out, and then Dumbledore would dismiss me from the Order."

Shaking his head and sighing, Harry took a steadying breath, "For helping me? How does that... his logic astounds me, sometimes. I suppose I was to be sullen and torn with grief all summer, jumping at any chance he offered me to escape? That I'd grasp at any branch he offered, as long as it lead back to Hogwarts?" Sneering, he slammed his hand against the wall, the impact echoing slightly in the mostly empty room.

"So it would seem," the quiet voice of Tonks affirmed, from his side. "None of us were to speak with you, something he said was open to our discretion at the meeting I'd wager," smirking, she laughed then. "Not that I remember it, but what I do and don't recall, says enough."

Harry turned and raised a brow quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I have to assume, as I can't recall the address or location of Grimmauld, other than that at least, that I've been stricken from the Fidelius that protects it. I took to storing my memory of specific things, each day I was on watch with you, just in case I had to act." Stifling a yawn of her own, Tonks settled back onto her pillow, continuing her story, "Monday proved to be the day. I'd left and sent a missive spell to my contact in the Unspeakables, letting them know I'd be bringing you here. I'd arranged it nearly a week ago. Turns out they were anxious to speak with you as well."

"Well, after busting up the place, I'm surprised it took them this long to come find me," his amusement evident, Harry finally laughed at his companion's snort.

Recovering from her fit of giggles, Tonks continued, "After that, it was a simple matter of stunning you, packing your things, then Apparating you out to a neutral location before activating a Portkey to here." Looking up at Harry, she seemed to waver a moment. "I'm sorry for that. I wanted to tell you, but to make it all look convincing, I had to do as I had. I'm sorry."

He looked over her logic, and found that were she to approach him, he would have left willingly. Considering Dumbledore's contacts, and the man's blind luck, there was a good chance that if they'd planned and deliberated on simply leaving, something would have gone wrong. "I understand. Don't worry about it, alright? This time, it's all just the method of getting me here. Given my options, I'd be here anyway."

Nodding, she seemed to relax and stop avoiding his gaze. "After we'd settled you and I'd scripted what I was to say and know, my contact performed a Pensieve drawing and memory charm for the meeting," smirking a bit, she recalled the precautions enacted to make this as flawless as possible. "After, I was left Obliviated in my flat. I checked the wards and figured out what was going on, then took back my stored memories and knew what had to have happened. I left and haven't planned to go back," grinning a bit at Harry's look of horror, she finally laughed. "What? You think Dumbledore will leave it with just dismissing me? He has to make sure, Harry. Soon it'll be my job, and then without an umbrella over me, my life."

"It took a lot of work, getting you out of his grasp. But at least now, you have some freedom. I can rest knowing Sirius would be happy with that."

"I don't know, Tonks," Harry said quietly, not wanting to steal from her that contentment, but his own doubts crawling forward. "Have I just traded one prison for another? Look at this place," swinging a hand out to the blackness around them, Harry sighed. "It feels like just another set of walls, caging me."

Tonks sighed, but didn't lose that look of satisfaction. "It may seem so now, but once we get settled somewhat, I know they'll open doors and let us move about more. Just remember that these are the Unspeakables, Harry. They're the most secretive and mysterious

force in our world. We're working on their good graces and a promise, so I feel we owe them some patience."

Abashed, Harry nodded and sat up, "You're right. I've not even been here a day, and I'm already talking myself into a state. I'm sorry, I should just calm down and try to take things in the proper light first."

Harry stood and was about to settle back on the floor when he heard Tonks moving, a hand catching at his sleeve. "Just keep your hands to yourself, and we can both share the bed. Deal?"

Blushing furiously, Harry nodded and collected his pillow. Settling under the coverlet, he spent what felt like a day staring up at the darkness, trying not to think about the young woman less than a meter away from him.

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Tonks woke feeling a deep sense of contentment, something she'd lacked since the inaugural ceremony that named her an active Auror. She was warm, and the bed was comfortable and she had no intention of getting up if there was anything she could do about it.

"Tonks?"

She snapped her eyes open and nearly Apparated in shock, jumping rather backwards from the voice a few inches from her face. Panting and half sleep-addled still, she took in the sight before her with color rising along her skin.

Harry sat, or practically sprawled, across the bed, obviously shifting from the position he'd taken to her spooning up against him in the night. His hair was more mussed than usual, and he blinked, his glasses somewhere else than along his nose. "Tonks... it's alright. It's just me."

Nervously laughing, she hugged herself and shook her head slowly, taking deep, steady breaths. "Sorry. Just... a dream." Settling on a

shower to settle her mind, Tonks collected the odd bits of clothing quickly, still shaking. She'd slept in a brief pair of shorts, and similar top, so she felt too exposed in the air, without a blanket. Snatching up her robe she dashed for the bath, only pausing once in the smaller room. Breathing deeply a few moments, she stilled her hammering heart and whirring mind. Before she started the water, she peeked back out just before closing the door.

"Ah, Harry?"

A muffled sigh and quiet "Yes?" answered her.

"We... didn't, ah. Well that is..."

Silence for a moment, before a slight nervous laugh met her ears. "No, Tonks. Just sleep. Sleep and talk."

"Right. Of course," closing the door quickly, she let loose a held breath and sank to the floor, hands over her eyes.

Staring at the ceiling, Harry wondered what had scared Tonks so, that she'd gone from the picture of quiet rest, to panic. He'd been entranced at how peaceful she'd seemed, her nose twitching slightly in her sleep as she very, very faintly snored. The sound was less the raucous grind that he was familiar with from Ron, and more akin to a purr.

He's wanted to wake the pretty Auror, as he desperately need to make his morning absolutions, but hesitated at seeing her sleep so. Losing the war, he'd tried to wake the young woman, where she lay curled up against his shoulder, only to seemingly shock and upset her. "Right bloody brilliant way to wake up," he grouched, realizing with a groan that Tonks was running the shower, and he was locked out of the loo.

Harry spent the next five minutes writing a very detailed request for a second bed, and if possible, bath. The parchment seemed to fade into the table as he'd left it there, and Harry went about trying to hone his Occlumency skills, against the pressure in his abdomen.

Another ten minutes passed, and Harry was beginning to compare his plight with the Cruciatus curse when the water stopped and he felt the bittersweet hope that comes with expectation. As Tonks opened the door, she was faced with a very grim-visaged Harry, and nearly slammed the door in his face.

"Excuse me," he mumbled quietly, and Tonks moved from his way and sat on the bed, perplexed at the young man's behavior.

"Right odd morning all the way around," she observed, shaking her head as the towel soaked up the excess water from her hair.

As Harry emerged, clean from his own shower and no longer comparing his long morning to a curse, he took in the room and his companion, letting last night's conversation finally come to the fore of his thoughts. "So, you think Dumbledore will get you sacked from the Ministry?"

Tonks nodded, changing her hair color in a hand mirror slowly. "Likely. Chances are he'd either use memory charms or the same trick I did to get it done, false memories and all."

"You could fight it you know."

Smiling, she shrugged, which deepened Harry's frown, "Well, I could. But I won't. I'd rather go quietly, as he intends, rather than cause too much of a racket. Rusty nail and all."

Nodding in understanding, Harry sat heavily on the bed. "Still, all that work, for nothing."

"You mean Auror academy?" Tonks asked, settling on a mild lilac color for the day. Harry signaled his affirmative and she simply smiled. "I know I did it. You know. Important people will know. That's all I need, really."

Shuffling his feet into the oversize hand-me-down trainers, Harry had to concede to her logic. "What will you do though? I thought being an Auror was what you wanted."

Tonks sighed, shaking her head slowly. "What I wanted, was to fight You-Know-Who. Aurors were just the most accessible way to do so, I thought." Grinning at him, she poked a finger at his chest. "Also why I joined the Order, but it turns out, I had it all wrong. We did less fighting than waiting, and Fudge's Ministry would be content to let Vold... bloody... You-Know-Who! Simply buy his way to power."

"Right. Suppose I had it wrong too," Harry glumly shook his head, remembering the small goals he'd try to set for himself. He'd spoken to a few people about a career at one point, and an Auror was the best he could come up with. Tonk's experience though, told him that perhaps it wasn't such a sound idea after all.

"Enough dwelling and moping though," she cut in, pulling him from his darkening thoughts. "What shall we do with the day?"

Harry laughed, shaking his head, "How should I know? Until we get cleared for the library, I suppose we can go eat, sleep some more, and have another bath." His cynicism wasn't lost on the young woman, who simply smirked in response, earning her a glare.

Stretching and missing the small course around her flat to jog in already, Tonks motioned for the door, "Well, best to get to it then. Lets see what the hold up is and see about the rest."

The room they were quartered in was much like the others, from what he could see in the hall. The only real defining trait was a series of lines outside it, something Harry had only really recalled in any familiar sense from his Ancient Runes studies. "Tonks, do you recognize this?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. It says, 'Guest Quarters, Tonks & Potter'," she idly noted, shrugging.

Harry blinked at her for a moment before returning his attention to the seemingly random scratches. "What language is it in, then? I barely recognize it."

Turning, she traced a defined center line from the top of the vertical inscription, to the base, "See this? It's called the Trunk or Ceap, like

saying 'cap'. You'll likely learn a bit of this in your Runes classes. Whenever you see something like this," Tonks traced the center line, letting her fingers spread to the small crossing lines and whorls, "remember that it's Ogham. I'll see if we can find a reference for you somewhere."

"Odd way to write something," he noted as they passed further down the hall. Regardless, he tried to denote the particular pattern to memory, if only to remember their room.

Tonks snorted and looked over her shoulder at him, "Well, it wouldn't be in your Ancient Runes class if it were modern, hm?"

The pair entered the commons, and Harry again felt out of place in this shifting world of grays. In contrast, he and Tonks stood out like flamingos in a flock of crows. "Shall we go get some food then?" his companion asked, and he nodded his agreement.

Breakfast was a similar affair to their meal yesterday, simple but filling. Harry had become rather fond of the lightly tangy, spongy bread they seemed to keep by the loaf ready to be had. To be honest, the simple quantity of food was more appealing to him than the quality or preparation, having never eaten so well over a summer as now. Tonks sat and watched Harry tuck in, shaking her head slowly. She knew the reason for his enthusiasm, but it still warmed her a bit to see his happiness.

They had just settled quietly into conversation about what to do at this point, when the familiar form of their guide seemed to glide from the crowd, bowing slightly by their table. "Forgive the intrusion, but I would like to inform you, the warding of the library is complete. You may browse it at your leisure, no sensitive texts will endanger you."

"Endanger us?" Harry looked from Tonks's shrug, back to their host. "What do you mean?"

Seemingly lost in thought briefly, the figure shook its cloaked head slowly. "The most I can say, is that some knowledge cannot be passed idly." Settling gracefully into a chair, the figure seemed to

regard them both curiously. "I was informed your lodging was unsatisfactory. Were we mistaken in your accommodation?"

It was Tonks's turn to color at this, and she stuttered a moment as Harry watched, bemused. "That is, ah. You see, we're not..."

"Ah, I understand. I shall arrange for alterations today while you are absent from the room," if Harry wasn't mistaken, he could have sworn the cloaked woman's voice carried a hint of amusement. They conversed briefly about the library, and the preparations that had been made to it for their access. As it turned out, a complex hiding charm was in place, simply allowing anyone to use the room, but the books they'd see were limited by an escalating series of permissions.

"Hogwarts could take a hint from that," Harry noted, remembering the lax security around the Restricted Section and the methods the school used to protect its dangerous information. They walked to the opposite side of the commons than the dorms, and were soon walking down another nondescript hall. "Excuse me, and I don't want to sound rude, but are all the rooms and areas here the same style? The other rooms outside are rather normal, I was just wondering why everything was so, well, plain."

Their host paused, looking about them quietly a moment. "The Murmur's Hall, this place beyond the Locked Room, is a place of study and contemplation," as she continued down the hallway, they kept stride with her, as she explained. "There are rooms outside, as you say, but those are partially for appearance, partially for practical use. Here, we focus inward, rather than out."

"Makes sense," Tonks added, beside Harry's nod.

The library shortly opened up before them, and the trio found themselves in a storehouse of book and scroll and tablets larger than anything Harry had seen. "I thought Hogwarts was the largest magical library in Britain," he mused, walking forward into the well-lit room.

"It is," the cloaked woman countered, gesturing with a slim hand to the shelves. "Not all knowledge here is magical. Much of it is practical

science and general observation, made by muggles and wizards." She turned and stood by a standing pillar of stone, that held more of the marks Harry had recently learned were the Ogham language, or alphabet. He wasn't sure of the specifics. "Here is the catalog. Simply explain what you want, and the relevant information will be made apparent."

Seemingly done with her introduction and tour, the figure made to leave but Harry held up a stalling hand, halting her. "Wait, I have a question."

As before, her posture seemed to weaken and she appeared to slink back into her cloak at Harry's attention. "Yes?"

"What is your name?" Again the question seemed to strike the woman like a physical blow, and she ducked around his hand and out the door without an answer. Harry stood confused and frustrated, running his hand through his unmanageable hair. "What is with that? All I want to know is her name."

Tonks laughed quietly, running a hand along the catalog stone. "Touchy subject, seems. Well, now we're here. What shall we look for?"

Harry stalled, and looked over the immense library with the same foreboding that usually followed the announcement of a Potions Practical. "Well..."

Snickering, the young Auror motioned for a table, picking up a few sheets of parchment and a quill along the way. She stalled a moment when she saw, on a table further in, simple composition notebooks and pens. Shrugging, she replaced her previous supplies and picked up a notebook and a pair of pens and joined Harry at a nearby table.

"Here's where you'll be glad you're stuck with me," she quipped, as Harry continued to stare about them, looking lost. "First things first... what are your goals? What should we be working toward?"

"Defeating Voldemort," Harry answered mechanically, then grimaced. "No, not that."

Tonks raised a brow, setting her pen down gently. "What do you mean, I thought that was our goal."

Looking pained a moment, Harry nodded but stayed silent for a moment. "It is. Let me explain," gesturing around them, he stilled. "Like when we were shown about yesterday. They had to key us to the library, before we could enter. It's like that, there are things I have to do, first.

"Things I need to know, and it's not just spells and potions and proper wandwork." Resting his chin in a hand, Harry stared at the blank paper, deep in thought. "Have you never wondered, how Voldemort returned from the dead? How he survived as a wraith, or possessed Quirrell? How he managed to live as that horrid child-form?"

Going very still, Tonks's eyes widened slightly. "One... would think that to be a good place to start on figuring out how to defeat him. Can't say that the Order had ever mentioned it, or the forms he'd survived in, that you mentioned."

"Someone told me something a long time ago, to know your enemy, you can best defeat them... or something like that."

Tonks seemed to smile a little, before reciting, "'It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle.' It's from Sun Tzu's The Art of War. What you were thinking, was the simplified version. 'Know thy self, and know thy enemy, and you shall be victorious'." When Harry simply looked at her as if she'd suddenly started spouting fire from her mouth, she snorted. "What? I'm more than just a pretty face, Harry."

Shaking his head, the young wizard laughed quietly. "As I'm finding out, daily. Yes, that exactly. We don't know anything about Tom, what he did to become the monster he is, or how he survived the Killing Curse rebounding on him, or failing, or whatever it was." Tapping a pen he'd claimed on the sheet of paper, he started outlining his ideas.

"To get to here," he pointed, the heading 'Defeat Tom' clearly written, "we need to work on learning about him."

Tonks nodded, but added a second heading, at the bottom of the page. It read, 'Understand Harry' with a quirky little smile beside it. "Don't forget the other part of the proverb."

"Right..." sighing, he shook his head in defeat. "Why do I feel no further along than when the summer started?"

Snorting, the Auror shook with quiet laughter. "Maybe because we've been working five minutes?"

Humming, Harry tapped his chin looking contemplative. "So we have." Ducking the pen Tonks threw at him, he laughed and retrieved the make-shift projectile. "In all seriousness, lets step back a bit and look closer to now, as opposed to the end of the line."

Sitting back in her chair, Tonks ran a fingertip up and down the bridge of her nose slowly, thinking. "Right. Logical process. To defeat... Tom? Tell me later – You need to be more powerful."

"To get more powerful, I need to train," Harry replied, scratching this down below the heading.

"Training means you need access to material," tilting her head, she amended that with a shake of her head. "And to have the means. No tracking charm, or detectors."

Sighing and shaking his head, Harry scratched the last down, "Which means I either need to be at my majority and emancipated, or to somehow get a waiver from the Ministry."

"Latter isn't likely to happen anytime Fudge is in office," Tonks noted, scratching down a caricature of the Minister in his bowler, scowling at Harry's name. Despite himself, Harry laughed at this. "Hold on – where were you born, Harry?" she asked intently a moment later.

"Ah, Godric's Hollow?" He offered with a shrug. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I know the cottage my parent's were living at was there, when... when they were killed."

"Cottage? No, not that can't be right." Tonks bolted up and ran to the catalog stone, as Harry watched her with a bemused expression. She Summoned a book to hand, and came back with a set look about her face. "Look, when I was talking with Sirius, he mentioned he purchased a house back when he was seventeen, but why did he never return there?"

Harry blinked, trying to find the answer to Tonks's Riddle. "Well... perhaps the house was seized? No, they left Grimmauld be, so the other would as well."

Tonks grinned like the cat who caught the canary, as she scanned the page below her finger. "Follow with me a moment. Look here – Godric's Hollow, property exchange records." The names and listing went on almost without end till a point that caught his eye.

"Here," he pointed, the passage causing his eyes to widen. "May 1980, property exchange between the Houses Black and Potter, in recompense for damages done to Estate and holdings. Title of land shall pass to the care of Jame Potter," sitting back, Harry laughed at the description. "You know what that means?"

Wearing a smirk that would make Draco envious, Tonks nodded. "'Damages to Estate and holdings', meaning the Potter Estates are still out there are large. As well as your possible birthplace."

"Tonks, I don't understand why the sudden preoccupation with my place of birth, help me understand here." As if it were the simplest thing ever, the Auror sketched a number under Harry's name, causing him to blink. "Sixteen? Yes I will be, this year. What of it? The age of majority in England is eighteen."

"But in Scotland, it's sixteen," she said, closing the book and going to find another.

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The pair spent the rest of that day looking feverishly for any records that could tell them of Harry's House standing, whether it be in England, Ireland or Scotland. He was sure the Estate had to be in Britain, so they didn't bother checking international records. When it became apparent that there would be no data of the sort they were looking for in the Unspeakable's library, they settled instead to collecting books pertaining to the Queen's law, and the magical counterpart.

"We need help," Harry finally admitted, rubbing at sore eyes behind his glasses wearily. At Tonks's startled squeak he looked about blinking, noticing he still and somewhat expectant form of their host standing by his shoulder. "Ah. Hello?"

The hooded woman nodded, looking between them slowly. "You called, Harry?"

"I did?"

She seemed to cock her head at him quizzically. "Did you not request assistance?"

Laughing quietly, he nodded and sighed, gesturing for a chair, "Have a seat, let me explain." Between the two of them, they managed to reference and explain their problem. Over the next half an hour they learned that all birth records of children born of muggle families, but suspected of wizarding blood, are duplicated and stored at the Ministry, until such a time as a blood sample can be had, usually at a doctor's appointment. A healer from St. Mungo's would often be illusioned to look like a nurse and a sample taken to the hospital proper for analysis.

Wizarding births were simpler, in that all records were kept at the Ministry Department of Magical Inheritance and Titles. Harry's eyes narrowed at the mention of that particular office and he started thinking, along lines most Slytherin.

"How are those records maintained? I mean, how can they be accessed?"

Pursing her lips, Tonks tapped her chin with her pen, "I think if one has a Ministry pass, records of non-minors are available to members above their station within House."

Harry grumbled and heaved a breath between his teeth. "Lost me there, try again."

"Sorry, I'm used to this being explained to recruits," leaning her elbows on the table, Tonks continued. "Say you were the head of House Potter, and someone of your lineage went to check your records. Because your status as Head is supreme, no one would be able to access them." Stretching, she went on, "now, say you're the fifteenth cousin of a distant aunt. Just about anyone with House blood could see it."

"Problem one – you said 'non-minors', I take it because of my status, I'm out?"

"Right in one, at least for accessing your own or any other family records," Tonks agreed, chewing her lip in thought. "Wait. This is too easy."

Brow raised, Harry looked around and ducked slightly, "Just so you know, that phrase scares me, Tonks."

"But seriously! Think about it – at least until I'm sacked, which should take at least a week to push the paperwork even for Dumbledore, I'm still an Auror. You've been missing..." Tonks called a time display with her wand and grinned widely, "At least thirty hours. Missing person's reports are valid at twenty-four."

Considering this, Harry had to shake his head. "You're overlooking one important thing. Dumbledore." Growling under his breath, Harry ran his hand through his black hair, upsetting it further. "If word got out I was missing, can you imagine what he'd lose?"

Banging her hand on the table, Tonks nodded. "Right. He'd be covering it up. And if I did enter the missing wizards report, it'd become obvious I'd cheated his memory charm. Damn it!"

The quiet voice of their host, nearly forgotten pulled them both back to the moment, "Excuse me, but this really isn't that difficult."

His eyes narrowed, Harry looked to Tonks, who shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"We are Unspeakables. We were never there, and you did not see us." Rising, she simply passed beyond the hallway, to the bemusement of the two who sat watching with wide eyes.

"Do you think?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid to."

An hour passed as they researched the law involving majority cases and emancipation, where it had become apparent that the key to all their work would be the information their host hinted at being able to acquire. They'd come upon some loopholes that dealt nicely with their current problem, but as it seemed, everything hung in the crux of that one file.

Tonks had laid her head on her arms, and was snoring that almost imperceptible purr when Harry caught motion at the edge of his vision. The slight woman had returned, and in her hand was a small flat file.

"Harry, I believe this would be of some assistance," she said simply, the folder expanding to normal size as it lay on the table.

Tonks snorted and woke at her words, blinking blearily at the figure and the papers, before coming fully awake. "That the one?" Yawning, she stretched as Harry inspected the files.

"I'm not sure – Why is everything here blank?"

The young woman sat and shook her head slowly, gesturing at the documents. "All record of your birth, beyond the date and parentage,

were erased. No existing copy can be found, or was present in the Ministry office. It as if some great magic works to keep this information hidden."

Laying his head in his hands, Harry let loose a sigh. "That was our one shot. Now we have to start over, from a different angle."

Reaching out the form, their host turned it in a hand slowly for a few moments. "Why not simply fill in the blanks?" Harry and Tonks looked at each for a moment, then began laughing. Their host looked from one to another and shook her head slowly, "I did not think that was amusing," she murmured, with a sigh.

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"You know, Harry, it'd be easier just to find some place believable and fill it in as she said," Tonks pointed out, the second day of their research nearly done.

Harry shrugged, but kept up his searches, giving the cloaked woman tasks to retrieve records of land and title passing almost every day to research. "I know, but it'd rather it be truth, than a lie, if I could help it. Besides," grinning, he rolled his neck, working out the kinks. "Wouldn't you want to know?"

Conceding the point, Tonks nodded, "Suppose so." A few more minutes stretched between them, and she found herself staring not at the books, but at the young man across from her, diligently reading. "Bet you wish Hermione were here helping you."

"No, she'd get sidetracked and find some odd loophole involving ritualistic scarring and a mandate from some forgotten King." Chuckling, Harry smiled and shook his head slowly, "No, she and Ron need this summer. Besides, it's not like you're bad company or not helping, Tonks."

Shrugging off his acknowledgment, she focused on the other thing he'd pointed out, "She and Ron? Are they an item now?"

"I think so, hold on – there," Harry scratched down a note, in the page she'd found out was a listing of possible fake birthplaces. As it turned out, Harry wasn't just looking up his actual family Estates, but also possible false ones as well. "She mentioned wanting things between them to get closer in a letter, and I wrote back hoping them the best, this summer."

Mulling this over, Tonks had to admit, the 'Golden Trio' was in for a bumpy year, if things continued as they were. "It doesn't bother you?"

Harry looked up in surprise at this, and regarded Tonks for long moments. "No, not at all. Contrary to the Prophet, I was never romantically involved with 'Mione. She's just one of my best mates."

Nodding, but realizing Harry hadn't gotten her real point, Tonks nevertheless dropped the topic. "Any luck finding the record you need?"

"Nothing yet. I need something that would just tell me who owns what and where. Isn't there a record somewhere of that?"

Shrugging, Tonks yawned and stretched her back, "Gringott's has the most exten...sive... oh. Why wasn't I thinking!

"Bill sent you your key! He knew something like this was up, or something involving your inheritance! Damn my foolish mind, we wasted two days on this!" Fuming, Tonks slammed her notebook closed and stalked away from Harry, as he sat stunned and silent at the table.

Rising he closed the distance and stopped an arm's length from the irate Auror. "Tonks, listen. We're not investigators, alright?" She shook her head hard and snorted, waving at her robes, the ones she'd taken to wearing that proclaimed her an Auror. "Still, we can't always see every answer to a Riddle plainly. Sometimes it's too easy to expect the hard answers."

Nodding, she turned back to him and gave him a half-hearted smile. "Still, should have remembered."

"Well, I'd forget – and do! since I don't go there more than once a year. How often do you visit your vault?" he asked, but blinked when Tonks laughed. "What?"

"Harry, not every wizard has a vault," Tonks motioned back to their table, away from the racks upon racks of scrolls she was standing by and they retreated back to their study area. "Most just keep their money on hand, or manage a simple tally with the Goblins."

Puzzling over her words, Harry queried her on a point, "Tally? What do you mean?"

Shrugging and looking a bit uncomfortable, Tonks explained. "Wizarding money is a complex thing. In most ways, it's fairly hard to do the math, when you have to manage the conversion from Galleons and Sickles to Knuts, then turn around and make it into Pounds, things just get too much for most of us to deal with." Tonks pulled out her wand, and with a small word and a number, produced a small stamp. "This is an Vault Stamp, but the name is a bit misleading. Originally they were only issued to Vault holders, but the convenience was too great," she vanished the stamp and continued. "When you're given a bill, or a due notice, if it's written in Permissory Ink that's been enchanted by the Goblins, this stamp and that note will automatically move monies between holders."

Harry's eyebrows rose at this. "I had no idea, that's rather efficient. I wonder why I never got one."

Smirking a bit, Tonks settled back by her notebook, "Can only have one if you're at majority."

"Oh, that again," Harry groused, shaking his head. "But it's a Vault Stamp. So you don't have a vault?"

"No Harry, just a tally of my moneys, kept in the larger Gringott's banking fund. There's no specific nook for my income – likely it'd be a waste of a cavern."

The information left Harry feeling the gap between him and the average wizard again, and it put him in a dark mood. "Well, supposing we could find out from Gringott's, when do you think we could be loosed from this place to do so?"

His wording wasn't missed on Tonks, whose lips tightened into a line. "Not sure. We have at least a week to get this done, so don't work yourself up over it yet. Lets ask when we have a chance?"

"I'm not working myself up," Harry sniped, looking around at the blank, empty walls and the thousands of books and scrolls with a baleful glare. "I just hate these walls, feeling like I've traded one prison for another. I want to be doing something, Tonks! Not sitting here, crawling around in Riddles and puzzles. I'm a fighter, not a scholar. I learn by doing, by being in the thick of things, not from pictures and passages of moldy text."

Shaking her head slowly, Tonks stood and started walking back toward the commons. As she stepped beside Harry, she didn't look at him, but spoke regardless, "Then perhaps you should think on this. What will you do when the fighting is over? Who will you fight, when Vold... When He is no more?" She continued to the hall as Harry spun about, readying a retort, "What will you be when the fighting is over, Harry?"

The scathing retort died on his lips, and Harry looked at his hands, imagining them thick with the blood of his enemies, the war done. A war he didn't start, but did finish. Tonks's words echoed in his head and he shuddered, realizing he'd barely considered that very thing.

They'd talked of Aurors and the Ministry, and that had left a foul taste in his mouth, so much so that he had stricken it from his possible future. He'd not bend to a corrupt Minister, as a student, or an employee. Harry had no doubts the next one would be no better than Fudge.

Quidditch, sure. It had it's appeal, but what after? What of him? Harry had deluded himself for a long time, riding the accolade of his Housemates and Professors. He could play Quidditch, that was true, but who was ever simply the sport they played? The daily rags he'd

spied were rife with once-famous stars, heroes of this sport or that. Most were now as tarnished as the trophies, likely sold off to keep food on their tables.

He could play the sport, but would it be Harry Potter, the Seeker that was there, or the Man-Who-Triumphed? How easy would it be for the wizarding world to make a war hero a sports one? Disgusted, Harry took his notes and made his way to the commons, feeling slightly sick somewhere deep in his soul.

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The end of the week loomed on the pair, as they prepared for another day of study and research. After the small argument in the library, the conversation had stayed rigidly to topic, with barely a word outside of their puzzling being spoken.

Harry had found at least three dozen references to the Potter Estate, but nothing that would pinpoint its location. He was hopeful still, that the property would allow him the leeway he needed to take the next steps to being able to realize his goals. It was during their usual stint of research that he remembered Sirius's puzzle. "Tonks, how does the Ministry track spells, like you'd mentioned when explaining about being Obliviated?"

She looked up at him and seemed lost in thought a moment, before replying. "Signatures. When a wand is made, its signature is taken, then when it's first used, the signature charm identifies the wizard, and the two are recorded in the DMLE, Improper Use of Magic Office."

Considering this, Harry rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, "So, even if I'm granted an emancipation, someone on the inside could still track me by that."

"If they managed to get a spy in that far," shrugging, she sighed and nodded. "Yeah. It's possible."

Going silent, the young wizard simply closed the book he'd been working on, and returned it to the shelf. Standing by the catalog stone, he thought about the Riddle, and the pieces of the puzzle he'd worked out.

First, he was rather sure that inside, there was a wand. That was made apparent from the first verse. The why of Sirius sending him a wand was becoming clearer, and each day he longed to open the box and start his training. He thought, perhaps the Hall he and Tonks were staying in was proof against the tracking charms, but this proved false, he was assured.

The second verse spoke of the mastery of wands, and supposedly some skill that had nothing to do with them. This confused Harry, and his one attempt to open the box with physical means resulted in him having to hide the badly slagged and scorched remains of a hammer. He understood well enough the principal behind a wand being 'mistuned' to a wizard, and how losing a magical duel could cause it.

It was at the third verse that his understanding broke down. The first line was simple enough – if the box did truly contain a wand, then it spoke of it's impossibility to be opened with one, while the second assured him that he was correct in it's contents. It was the last two cryptic lines that utterly lost Harry. "My magic doesn't sing," he murmured to the back of his hand, thinking on what to attempt researching first.

Rolling his eyes, he attempted a lark, "Singing magic," he told the stone, as three books immediately shone on the shelves. He stepped to each, investigating their contents. The first was on the principals of Banshee song, which was no use to Harry. The second was a biography of Celestina Warbeck, the recording artist. "Well, maybe Tonks would like this," he mused, tucking it under an arm.

On a disused shelf, nearly too high to reach without the ladder, Harry found the third and final book, which was printed almost entirely in runic letters and utterly incomprehensible to him. "Lovely, just what I needed." Regardless, he pulled the book and returned to the table, setting the biography by Tonks. She gave it a cursory glance and giggled, shaking her head.

"Can you make any sense of this?" Harry asked, showing her the last book. Squinting, she tilted her head from one side to another, but finally shook it slowly.

"It's in Futhark, Germanic runescript. That's the alphabet used anyway, the language is beyond me," she noted, but quirked up the corner of her lip. "Help please."

A moment later, the same slim, cloaked woman seemed to glide down the hallway toward them, looking from one to the other expectantly. "Is there something you need assistance with?"

Harry raised a brow and sighed, deciding to let the woman's odd behavior be. Tonks smirked a bit, but held up the book, "Is there some way we can translate this, or find someone who knows the language?"

She took the book and turned the spine to inspect, running a finger along it slowly. "We have charms within the library to assist in such, forgive me for not mentioning it sooner. I was unaware many books would be unscribable by normal methods."

Tonks had the sense to not look abashed for forgetting such a simple spell. "Ah, of course. Harry can't perform magic yet so..."

"Of course," the hooded woman said, a slight hint of humor to her voice. "This should make it readable," slipping the book back into Tonks's hands, she stepped back, blending in with the walls and shadows.

Blinking at the now revealed title, Tonks gasped, her memory suddenly going back to her failed yet informative research project, the weekend before they'd sought asylum. "It's the book, Harry."

Rising, the young man stood behind her, seeing the words shift from runic, to simply foreign, a name he remembered, to simple English. "Wandless Magic; Theory and Practice," he murmured, a smile cracking his somber mood like a hammer. "This is the one that I needed!"

"When you set me to research it, I found out it was banned by the Council in the 1200's, as being a danger to the wizarding community," Tonks recalled, running her fingers along the worn green cover slowly, reverently. "There was a schism among wizards then, on whether the book should be outlawed outright, or simply ignored. They chose instead to destroy all copies and those that adhered to it's ideals."

Harry gently took the book from her hands and grinned, feeling a laugh bubbling up inside him, "No wonder, if any had the Sight, they'd see how dangerous it could be. Think how hard the Ministry's job would be if everyone could do this, Tonks."

They stared at one another for a moment before clearing off the table and poring over the first few pages eagerly, as if they were first years again and had just gotten their first textbook.

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It was with great reluctance that Harry pulled himself from the book on the table, his eyes having long since gone a rheumy red. He rubbed at them, and stared with watery vision at the lone candle adorning the table. Everything he read had made perfect sense, even the use of accidental magic by young wizards in time of duress or stress.

The book outlined the basics of Apparation, as well as the peculiarity of Metamorphs and Animagi, and how each were a peculiarity of one's magical core. In essence, 'magical genetics' and the randomness of chance were factors, but not the full reasoning. As Harry understood it, Tonks's statement some time ago that Metamorphmagi weren't made, but born seemed rather apt. Apparently the same could be said about Animagi, and Harry had pored over that section as if were water and he dying of thirst.

It outlined the process and dangers, particularly to one not fully into the maturation of their magical core. He didn't see anything more on that, but the described flow of magic, the process of visualization and

assumption, as well as a potion and ritual were of particular note. He marked the page with a small strip of paper, a habit he'd taken to over his summer, unable to even do the copying charm.

Most of his time had been spent on the theory behind wandless magic. He dove into the text and it was hours later, Tonks having spoken an unheard farewell some time ago, that he resurfaced. Smiling with the glee of a small child, he closed his eyes and focused, sensing for his magic.

Nothing responded, but Harry pressed on none the less, feeling suffocated in the darkness. He pulled upon his Occlumency, and the feeling of vertigo stilled, yet the oppressive darkness remained. It felt to Harry as if he were struggling through muddy waters, and he nearly gave up in frustration. Stilling himself, he instead focused inward, listening to his heart, the slow wind of his breath.

There

A pulse reached him, enclosed him. Harry struggled to maintain his calm, as he felt for that pulse again, trying to open his awareness broader, senses stretching-

Blindness

He kept his senses open, despite the pain of his inner eye being overwhelmed. Harry realized a startling thing, then. His magic wasn't weak, or faint as he'd assumed from speaking briefly of such with Tonks.

It simply didn't all reside within him. It diffused, a cloud about him. A small portion of him filed this idea away, for later as the bulk of his focus went to figuring out what to do with the cloud and whorl of his magic.

Harry could think of nothing profound. No spell or charm or great truth. So he sighed.

And breathed in his own magic.

It settled in his lungs, and spread up and out along his ribs, clinging like a vine. The feeling was difficult, awkward. He wanted to cough, to sneeze or both, but instead he breathed, great leaping gasps of air. The magic crawled through his blood, spreading, setting out and shoving at things as space grew too small and crowded for it.

It seeped between bone and skin along his fingers, and wrapped along, under and between his muscles. Roots lay in his spine, and trunks twined along his legs, tangling in his femur and the great muscles of his leg.

Harry stifled his panic as his breathing went short and rapid, the cloud about him growing dim, as he felt filled up, from toe to tangle of hair with his magic. His chest seemed to be too full, and his heart struggled with the effort to keep the ocean of his blood moving, flowing. Magic unfurled inside him with a sound like great branches and leaves shivering in a stiff wind.

Branches of that great tree wrapped around him, making room for themselves between his organs, wrapping around bones, and muscle. His brain felt compacted, stifled and brief. The pressure was killing him, pushing him out of himself-

Like a tide it receded slightly, giving him a moment to gather himself. He felt it, crawling, unrolling delicate leaves along his skin, for the sun. He could sense it settling its great roots into his heart, his spine and along his center. The cloud, a simpler thing now still rested along his vision, but he breathed it in and out, and felt it the pollen of his own great tree. It sustained his continuation, and he replenished it, with each breath. He felt the weight, bulk as it settled along his bones like a harness, supporting him, itself. It braced and depended on him, and he for once, felt his magic.

It was a great, dark tree, turned by the harsh winds of his life, but standing strong and resolute regardless.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his eyes. The candle, newly lit on his table had burned down to nearly a nub, while the books and table near him seemed to shimmer with a slight incandescent dust.

He felt a presence, familiar to his side and turned his head, finding the same cloaked woman who had attended them since their arrival.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Harry?" she asked simply, voice cast low despite how empty the library was.

Smiling, Harry breathed in again, and felt great branches shift and settle with a pleasant creaking. "I found the first steps," he replied, earning him a chuckle from his host.

"Then, let us proceed to the next ones," she offered, leaning forward to extinguish the spent candle.

A moment later, Harry's voice rang out clearly, if quietly along the full, dusty shelves. Light pulled out his features, the slight smile and twinkle in his eye, and his empty hands.

"Lumos."

Chapter Four.

Never appeal to a man's "better nature." He may not have one. Invoking his self-interest gives you more leverage.

–Robert A. Heinlein

Ginny sat and reread the last letter Harry had written to her, feeling puzzled and lost. Her mother had come out of the last meeting of the Order in a state, and gone straight to bed. Her anxiety over the state of things had only increased as the adults seemed to work with new energy – and anger.

"Evening lass, how are you feeling?" She blinked a bit and grinned as Moody sat across from her in the lounge, as he'd taken a habit to doing at the beginning of summer.

"A bit weary, Moody," she answered, leaning back into the rather deep cushions of the sitting room chair. "I haven't heard from Harry in a while, and worry that he's safe."

Chuckling a bit, Moody seemed to shake his own melancholy free, a heavy cloak the man wore with his scars. "Don't worry much on the young Potter, he'll always come up on top. It's the rest of us that need help, hmm?" They shared a laugh, both remembering the times that same young man had saved them.

The youngest of the Weasley children smiled sadly, taking a long breath and loosening it, disturbing her feathered hair, "I can't help it. He's started feeling more and more distant, as summer went on. Maybe Sirius's death did more harm than we thought." Schooling her features into a semblance of calm, she shook her head briskly. "Ron and 'Mione acting as if the entire bloody house were their own summer cottage isn't helping my mood a bit either."

"Language, young one," Moody quietly chided, bringing a rebellious blush to Ginny's fair features. "I'll have a word with them. A sister's mercies, as tender as yours are, may not be regarded as well as an old dog's."

Laughing quietly, Ginny let her mind wander, always as it tended to, to thoughts of Harry. She was staring into the fire quietly when Moody's sudden presence by her shoulder startled her out of her reverie, "Sorry, I..."

Alastor Moody shook his head slowly, claspings the young woman on the shoulder. "S'alright lass. We all worry over the lad. In time, all will end up as it should be." Kneeling by her side, the aged former Auror peered up into her eyes, as the pretty redhead concerned herself with the state of the fire. "Still not sleeping well, I take it."

Ginny shook her head and resigned herself with a weary sigh. "To be honest, Moody, I haven't in ages it seems like."

"Come then, lets have a drink and a talk, and settle you. Merlin knows I need it to get any rest in this crow's nest of a house," that said, Moody produced a familiar crystal flask, the same Ogden's Finest he'd been sharing with her since the day they'd arrived at Grimmauld. Ginny smiled a small smile and followed her family friend to the kitchen, for the one shot of whiskey she seemed to share with him every few days, as her sleeping deteriorated.

Their talking into the short hours seemed to calm the fair-skinned girl, and with a grateful wave and a calm mind, she retired to her bed. Moody waved her on, with a steady glance at her retreating form, and a pull from his ever-present personal flask.

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Dumbledore was not pleased with the current state of events. His letters of invitation to Horace Slughorn were going unanswered at best, returned unopened and mangled by some uncouth beast on average, and with a Howler attached in return at worst. He'd lost three Castle owls to the blasted exploding things, when his charmed window refused to allow the owls access. "Why is that man being so benightedly stubborn. Perhaps a personal visit..." heaving a weary sigh, the Headmaster looked to his still-ruined instruments, his attempts to assemble the delicate monitors consistently failing.

Rising from his desk, the aged wizard paced about his offices, tapping the wand he bore against his glasses rim occasionally. "Snape shall teach the Defense class, as he's wanted to so long... I cannot trust another to perform as I've asked at this point. Things grow too delicate," resting in his pacing, the eldest Dumbledore paused and reached out a hand to his equally weary familiar.

"Ah, Fawkes. How do you feel things to be progressing?" A weak trill was his only answer, and Dumbledore smiled, another sigh escaping to disturb his beard. "As I thought." His brow knit in consternation, as he considered his many splended and splintered plans and plots. "Potter is the key. Without him, all falls. A Keystone to this castle of cards."

Slughorn would not teach, would not provide the vital impetus to send Harry, loosed as a hound to the scent, without the boy there to give him his taste of fame. Horace was a simple man, with rich tastes – celebrity and fortune a finer wine and lure than any Amortentia. Yet without Potter...

Snape, brilliant and haunted, would mold him finally and reveal his soul. Who better to arm and sharpen the weapon he would wield, than the one who burnished the armor of the enemy? Severus's rage and grief would fuel and empower the boy, and with that momentum, his edge would be unstoppable.

But all this hinged, relied on, demanded, Harry Potter!

Another cycle of his office was completed before, seemingly at random, he found himself before the picture of Phineas Nigellus Black. "Albus, I see you're wearing the Headmaster's trail a bit deeper tonight."

"Indeed, Phineas. Indeed. Young Potter has taken himself from the board. I find myself in a precarious position."

The portrait seemed to settle itself more comfortably on the wall. "And so proud Gryffindor seeks advice, in time of trial and stratagem, from supple Slytherin."

Another great sigh shook the Headmaster's beard, "Yes, Phineas, I could use your counsel. I fear that some force is at work, in removing young Potter from the weave I've striven to sew him into.

"Years of planning. The Prophecy – a stroke of brightest luck. Here, in my hand the parentage and trust of the next great sword for the light." Grasping at air, the aged man seemed to pull at an invisible something, holding it aloft, "A chance to redeem a past mistake, and strike it down, all within one young boy. All he needed, was to be forged to counter it."

The elder Black, raising a brow, regarded the Headmaster, "Yet, the steel was wroth to be shaped, it refused the forge."

"Ever they question the wisdom of age and experience," Albus hissed and shook with a restrained rage. "Ever they deny the work of the Greater Good in favor of smaller rights or 'nobler' causes.

"Yet Potter was ripe. The Prophecy fulfilled itself, with barely a knock. Snape did, unwittingly, his own greatest act for the light in speaking those few mislaid words to his Lord." Shaking his head sadly, the man seemed to wither in his robes. "The rest was simply the play of a game well scripted.

"Tom came, marked the boy and was forced to retreat. I could not, with the Geis I had with him, strike him down. Still cannot! Such errors... no matter." Memories seemed to cloud the man's eyes, but he shrugged them off like a spring rain. "In so doing, he set his own doom to course. I merely had to set young Potter upon the board."

Phineas seemed to consider his nails briefly, an ear turned to the side of his portrait. "How to turn a Pawn into a King, Albus?"

"No King, Phineas. There is but one White King. A Knight, perhaps, flanked by a Queen and Rook I sacrifice to gain him position," laughing mirthlessly, the aged man walked by the portrait, pacing a small path before it. "But one has come and disrupted the board. My Knight has gone errant. Where, who could have done such?"

"Your Order are the only ones that know the boy's location, of course? You've taken pains to secret him away, precious and vital?"

"Of course. The charms and wards allow none but my Order to know of his location. Don't think me careless."

Conceding the point, the man in the frame simply shrugged, ever so slightly, "And those of it, loyal without question?"

Waving a hand at the man, Dumbledore made a flicking motion with his fingers, a dismissal, "Of course, of course. I am a leader. Leadership demands the use of proper skills and knowledge, and I am far from senile in their use. Their minds see what I wish them to see, they do as I wish. The only piece upon the board that has upset my plan is young Potter, and I cannot fathom how he could remove himself."

Bowing slightly, Phineas leaned forward, his hands laced under his chin. "Those lost to memory, are the most likely to make themselves remembered. A tactician once said as much, upon his deathbed. His long forgotten and land-stripped son's dagger between his ribs." With a knowing smirk, the elder Black stood and turned to leave the frame within the Headmaster's office. "I leave you now, Albus."

The fire in the cheery hearth crackling merrily went about it's business, as within the offices, a storm raged and fairly threatened the very stone of the castle. Inside this maelstrom, a single voice hissed a name, the malevolence of it's utterance wracking it into a curse.

"Nymphadora..."

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Narcissa Malfoy née Black stood and looked over the grounds of her home, the sprawling gardens home to rare and unusual birds that seemed to glow in the early July moonlight. The fountains laid a fine silvery mist in that same light, that seemed to hover and dance along

the manicured hedges. Her chin rose sharply and turning, she left the idyllic scene, resuming her attentions to the impromptu meeting with the thug and murderer that called upon her at her residence during such an uncouth hour.

"What say you, 'Foy?" a brutish sort was asking her, and the woman turned her gaze to him. The food he was ineptly trying to keep within his ample jowls, dribbled most disgustingly from his chin.

Her sneer rose and she huffed at the man, eyes cold, "Goyle. As you insist on imposing on my hospitality and resources, could you find it possible within your Sickle-weight brain to keep said hospitality, within your crass lips?"

The dullard simply blinked at her, as he had been since she began her abrupt tirade. "Oh never mind. What did you want, simpleton?"

Gregor Goyle's face seemed to collapse in on itself, as he struggled to swallow at least a half of the duck he'd been ravaging, sans a utensil. Finally, purpling only slightly from the lack of air, the man let forth a mighty belch and smiled, "Ah, das better. Was sayin', that the Will'll be read soon, what?" Nodding to his own question, the man's beady eyes traveled about the room, lighting far too often on the Lady of the house. "T'were askin, if you had need o'an escort, to the readin'."

Restraining her rising gorge, the woman fixed a steely glare on the piggish thug, currently arranged much like a drunken ghoul on her drawing room settee. "I do not, nor shall I ever, have need of your services, Goyle," turning and making her way briskly to the door the the grand hall, she turned and shot the man a piercing stare. "If your business here is concluded, begone before the turning of the hour."

"Oi, have one other word o'buisness with your Lady's ship," he said, reaching a grubby hand into his equally filth-ridden robe. Narcissa resigned herself to simply burning that particular set of furniture, mentally noting that there should be an equally aesthetic suite stored in her attics. "A message, from the Dark Lord," the man slurred, making a chill course through the woman.

Taking a stilling breath, the Lady Malfoy strode forward and deftly plucked the note, grasping what could very well be the only unsoiled corner of the envelope. "Very well – and message received, I will have you shown out," turning on her heel, the Lady snapped a finger imperiously, her voice rising, "Tilly! See him out!"

Goyle barely registered the sad and annoyance filled eyes of the house-elf, before he found himself dumped rather unceremoniously into the fountain, resting at the center of the front gardens. Shrugging, the man decided there was no sense wasting a good wash, and relieved himself into the crystal waters with a satisfied grunt.

Narcissa disposed of the filth adorning the crisp green envelope with a flick of her wand, and stared at it with ill-concealed trepidation. The hand behind the sweeping penning was most certainly that her husband's Lord, and would likely be some communication regarding the Will – it seemed everything these final few weeks was regarding it. "Why cannot this war leave me be? My husband lies behind the walls of Azkaban, my son the thrall of a half-blood fanatic, and my sister mad and lost to me," her crimson lips drew away from her teeth and she regarded the letter with contempt. "What more does he want?"

My Servant Narcissa,

No doubt, you are aware of the Will to be read, of your traitorous cousin soon. I leave such matters to you in the knowledge that you will take all necessary steps to ensure the continuation of my efforts. To think, that such petty concerns as Galleons could upset my work, yet there stands the truth.

The blood-traitor will no doubt try to usurp your son's rightful inheritance, so be prepared for all argument.

I hear young Draco is performing superbly, an example to My House Slytherin. See that the boy continues my will. The time for obfuscation and skulking in corners is nearly at an end.

To that end, I call to mind the failure of your husband, Lucius. He will soon feel the sharp barbs of that failure, when those dark walls

release him to my care. But fear not, Lady Malfoy née Black, I will return him to you.

Your family stands upon a crux, Narcissa. See that it does not tip out of my favor.

Lord Voldemort

Each word both chilled and inflamed her rage all the more. 'My Servant' she railed silently, stalking among the rooms of Manor Malfoy like a vengeful ghost. "I refuse to let that... I refuse to bear His Mark! I will not let the House of Black fall below the auspice of a half-blood that knows not his place!" Narcissa shouted and railed to the pictures of her ancestors, perched along the walls to many a nod and appreciative bow. "Nor shall I let Draco be so eclipsed.

"The gall of that beast! Oh, yes he's powerful, but he cannot kill one boy? Failed when he was barely a yearling, failed his first year at the Castle and every one since." Growing thoughtful, the Lady Malfoy looked to her family, the many paintings of Blacks adorning the walls of this, her most cherished room.

She was careful – oh so careful. The home was warded, so many rooms set to allow only her blood within, or those that shared it. The home that was called 'Malfoy' had long before been the residence of aged and retiring Blacks. As such, she knew it more thoroughly than any, and used that knowledge to her sanity and safety. "One Lord for another. I know Sirius's mind, the man had the nerve to come to me, in warning. 'Family obligation' he called it, but I see his reasoning now. Yes..." Turning swiftly, she moved to the desk within this room, and made herself busy for long moments.

Her tasks complete, she loosed her words on the wind, hoping those that would receive them to understand her needs.

Despite it all, she could not secure her son. His adoration for his father was absolute. That adoration and idolatry would lead him to the grave, she feared.

"I gave you blood, Lucius. And you give me ashes for my toil," seething, the woman took out a bottle of amber spirits, pouring a tall flute full with it. Draining it with nary a blink, the youngest of the Daughters Black heaved a great sigh, which nearly became a sob as she looked at the path her life was laid upon. "No more," she spoke with a hint of weariness.

Tomorrow, Bellatrix would arrive. Her small freedoms would be made smaller and fewer, with the mad eyes of her fanatical older sister upon her. Perhaps she could bend her... perhaps not. She was Black.

Steadying herself, she strode from the room and pulled the door to, listening to the house and its whispers for the location of her son. Her eyes turned to the cellars, and with her lips tightening to a fine line, the Lady Malfoy strode with a determined air to the hidden cellar, and her son.

The path opened before her, as the house knew her – her blood and Law. Stairs turned and shifted under her feet, and she found herself shortly stepping from the curving landing to the hewn stone floor in a handful of breaths. "Draco," she called softly, a stark contrast to her voice not an hour previous. "Draco, my shining one, it's your mother, what are you about?"

His pale hair appeared from behind a set of vials and pottery, and the sharp intelligence in his eyes begged her attention, "Come see, I'm almost finished."

Quelling her worry, the stately woman turned her attention to her son's work, "What are you brewing, Draco?" She watched with rapt attention at the deft work of knife and pestle, as her precious child turned his eyes quickly and easily from task to task.

"Something my own, and rather difficult," Draco smirked, but it softened to a genuine smile when it washed over her. Narcissa's heart broke again, as she saw his joy at invention and discovery unfettered. Putting her fawning thoughts to the side, the woman shifted her attention to the young man's work. She noticed pressed

sopophorus beans, and various vials indicating toxic ingredients and went impossibly pale.

"Draco, what is this?" she asked, a whisper the most she could manage.

Beaming at her mistaken wonder, the youth shrugged and settled the last of his infusion to steep, within a iron-black sieve. "I based it on the Draught of Living Death that we were to learn this year, but I had an idea... what if the potion actually instilled death in the drinker? A forced, but false death," his eyes alight, Draco took a small vial and motioned his mother to the side. "Watch," he said, taking the vial and upending it into a small water bowl, which he then gave to a large, disheveled looking rat.

Narcissa looked on with interest, but her mind was whirring. Her son was a brilliant potions student – no doubt his own Godfather's influence showing through there. But for him to be altering recipes that weren't even covered yet... "How would this forced death be righted, though? We have yet to reverse the one true magical death spell, so how can a potion both simulate and fool that ancient art?"

"By treachery, mother. Just watch – this is the unfinished potion, so it fails in truth, but the groundwork is sound." The rat, having long been left to thirst, was quite dead seeming, almost as she'd looked away the first time.

Whatever potency Draco had given his potion, it was steep. "I see step one is a success..."

"Test it mother. Try a medical charm – curse it even. With the Aveda Kedavra," he said, eyes lighting. "Yes, first the life-force charm, to see if it lives, then strike it with the Killing Curse."

Hesitantly, Narcissa drew her wand and ran the cursory, then detailed medical scans upon the creature. Both showed it as dead as Draco claimed. With a raised brow, she breathed a sigh and, bending to his will in this instance, assured the creatures death. "Aveda Kedavra," she intoned, a green jet impacting and shifting the small, cooling body.

Again the charms showed the beast, dead.

"Watch now, if I'm correct..." Draco moved to the side and took out a wicked dagger – a Kris by design. Its blade was black and burned looking, as if held too long in a flame. "Enchanted, one of Father's collection. I needed one that could withstand brief exposure to Fiendfyre and – "

"Draco!" Narcissa's voice had risen to the point it rattled some of the more delicate glassware. "I shall not again hear of you playing with such... unruly magics. This instance, shall be the last, unless you call upon me to watch," her voice softening, she ran an affectionate hand through her child's flaxen hair. "Call on me next time, I will be there to make sure you and the home remain safe."

"Yes mother," Draco sighed, smiling slightly. Moving from her side, he uncorked another potion, "This is the key – a mistake I made, when researching. Professor Snape helped me with a book on poisons and cures, but this also is my own." Fairly humming with anticipation, Draco lined the blackened Kris and bit his lip in uncharacteristic nervousness, motioning his mother back. "I don't know how well this will work with the failed poison. I'm going to set the cage to kill the beast in a minute, at most. Please, stand back somewhat."

With that, Draco very delicately cut a circular incision over the beast's still heart, and slammed it shut within the cage.

A moment passed, as the Lady Malfoy began to relax, the tall claims of her son's work fading into a youthful fancy, when a sound crawled up her spine and chilled her. "That can't be..."

The ragged rat shuddered, twitching at all extremities violently. Its spine seemed to vie for release from its body, and with a great heave, the small form slammed against the cage with a meaty thump. Again it struck, and the motion revealed that the beast was trying to smash its limp-necked head against its prison, before again the sound echoed about the small cellar.

If a rat could keen like a banshee, this would be its call, she felt.

As suddenly as the seizing fits began, they ended, and the beast stood, albeit dumbly, on shaky legs. It turned eerily to face them, and she nearly lost her constitution at it's eyes.

Inferius eyes.

"Incomplete... as I said," Draco, she noted, also had more than a trace of sickness to his voice. "It is why I set the cage to-"

A sharp crack and the rat fell, broken and dismembered suddenly. Sighing, Draco motioned at the cage and turned, "well, that."

Narcissa stood dumbly in the wake of her son's work. She looked about the transformed cellar and felt both fear and pride, at his achievement. The intrigue of the potion's potential took hold of her, and she stilled, mind working feverishly. "Tell no one, Draco. Test as you will, but tell no one."

"Mother?"

"Trust me child, my darling, shining son, in this if no other thing," she begged, standing by the young man as his gray eyes clouded, some thought fighting to surface. Long moments passed, and Draco blinked, the youthful spark returning to his gaze.

"I will, Mother."

Wrapping him in an embrace, Narcissa's eyes drifted to the work. Blood-red coils thickening in the pale green wash of the cauldron's contents. A sardonic smile lit upon her face. She gazed upon the still steeping sieve in the cauldron, and in it's rolling depths, she saw a future most grim.

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Tonks woke to the sound of a rhythmic thumping, and at first her only reaction was to throw a shoe against the wall, hoping the neighbors would still their bloody rutting and let her sleep. She then recalled

how she no longer had a flat, or neighbors and cracked open an eye to see a most peculiar sight.

"Harry, why is your trunk painted like an airbus and whizzing about the room?"

"Because it can, dear Tonks. Because it can," the young wizard said, with a barely restrained smirk. It was only then she noticed his empty hands, and a look of intent concentration upon his face.

She sat up suddenly, and for a brief moment held Harry's gaze, as his eyes widened. For a moment she felt bemused by his sudden shock, but then recalled her personal state of dress.

Undress, rather. "Harry! Look away!" Grasping at the coverlet, she hid herself and closed her eyes tightly, fighting her blush without success. A mere moment later, the resounding crack of a trunk crashing into the floor, and possibly someone, roused her from her mortification.

Peering over the blanket, she gasped and forgetting her impropriety, rushed to Harry's side. "Harry, how many fingers, how many?" The young man lay dazed, his glasses quite destroyed and some of the frame still bent about his nose, as the same darkened quickly.

"Ah... oh ow, bloody my nose..." wincing, Harry closed his eyes but snapped them back open again at Tonks's prodding. "Right! Alright, two... two..." rolling his eyes back the young man took a deep breath. "If you're going to check me for a concussion, Tonks, don't do so without a shirt," swallowing audibly, he cracked a grin as she made an embarrassed noise and scuttled away.

Huffing, the woman pulled a brief T-shirt on before she had to suffer more at his leisure. "Well you seem to be quite fine, I think I'll be about breakfast then," and without another word, he was left to the floor and his bleeding nose, blinking confusedly.

"Tonks?" Groaning, he righted himself and leveled a weak kick at his now-spilling trunk.

A pink-bobbed head popped back inside the door frame and the Auror raised a brow, inquiringly. "Back to being less of a git, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Ms. Tonks," Harry grated, reaching up gingerly to inspect his mashed nose. "But why were you topless in bed? I really must ask."

Fidgeting, she sighed and helped with Harry's predicament, her wand working quickly. "You were doing your Ravenclaw impression late into the night – hold still, Reparo –"

"Ou!"

"– had to mend them first before we could take them off. They were bent about the bone," she noted, swiping the now-whole glasses from Harry's bruising face. "And since you would be in late, and we now have separate beds, with a border – normally, I may add –"

Harry winced and was about to feel about his nose for the damage when his hand was rapped sharply about the knuckles "Cripes, why do you have to injure me more? And I'll have you know, it was your trousers that upset the thing and toppled it over. I would have woken and been hexing the room, had I not already been up practicing."

"Well, then alright," Tonks conceded, inspecting Harry's face critically. "I should just leave it be as a lesson..." his look of horror made her laugh quietly. "Joshing you. Can't be marring such a handsome face. Now, this'll sting a bit – oh, look, a Doxie–"

"Whe–"

"Episkey."

"BLOODY HELL!"

Tonks flicked her wand once, and stowed it in her pocket, "Right as rain. Care for a spot of breakfast?" Harry glared at her balefully from behind his tears and hands, which were weakly trying to soothe the now-knit bone and unbruised skin over his nose. "No? Pity, well I'll see you in a bit then, I'm going off for a bite."

Harry lay stunned and smarting on the floor, his vision swimming with small spots and whorls. "Damned woman will be the death of me," he mumbled, kicking in futility at the trunk again.

The morning's awkward awakening discarded, Tonks was in good spirits. Things were going well with their study, and according to their hosts, today they'd be free to leave and get out of the Hall. Apparently the warding of the interior had taken some time to key them to, and the work was finally done.

Wanting nothing more than to take a day out and enjoy some fresh air, the young Auror fairly bounced about her way to the cafeteria, before tripping apparently on air and landing with a resounding crack on the floor.

Dazed, she sat and rubbed at her palms from the impact, as the familiar form of their often company within the Hall rushed to her side. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no... well my pride a bit. I'd been doing so well, you know?" Laughing a bit, Tonks rubbed at her knees, urging the blood to return to them.

As she expected, the hooded woman simply tilted her head quizzically. "I do not understand."

Sighing, Tonks stood and winced, testing her legs and balance. "I'm a bit of a klutz – normally. Been doing well recently to keep it under control, but there it is."

The cloaked woman stood silently, seeming to look her up and down before leaning closer, keying her words for Tonks's ears alone. "How long, since you took your birth form?"

Paling visibly, Tonks drew away and continued on her way to the cafeteria, her fall forgotten in her brisk step. "Never you mind."

Kneeling where she'd whispered to the woman, the gray cloaked figure seemed to shift and draw in on itself resignedly. Shortly it made it's way back to it's fellows, until called upon again.

Harry stumbled out of the room, still weary from a lack of sleep. As Tonks had said, he spent the bulk of his night in study, but the young wizard felt it time well spent. His initial exhaustion at the long day had worn off as his excitement seemed to build overnight, finally driving him awake in the near hours, before Tonks.

His magic was still there, branched and sighing in the darkness of him, swaying on the winds of his breathing and the pulse of his blood. He played about briefly, doing a few small charms, and spells that he'd learned in first year. The levitation and light charms were rather easy, and he'd go so far as to experiment with casting them silently, and without a wand. The results varied, but each time he could feel the pulse of his power, the ebb and tide of it as he cast. Quietly, guiltily, he wondered at how Tonks had described magic as a pool one drew from.

What did it mean, that he pictured his magic, as a tree? Solid, rooted heavily and unchanging, simply bending and enduring. Was his magic the same? Solid and enduring? More questions arose before answers presented themselves, and into the early morning Harry had practiced almost the entirety of his first year spells. Some had better results than others, some worked not at all. After a time, Harry began emulating the motion of a wand with his hand, and the results improved, but still he felt... inefficient. He remembered the feeling of casting magic with his wand, and this was so very different.

Worried, he'd returned to the book and sought answers, as the sun began to rise, so far above his head. Among the chapters on growth and the result of 'wand contamination' on magical cores, he found his answer;

... had felt this same discomfort, after years of using the crutch of wands or staves to focus their own, purer magics. Children wield the power within them with gleeful abandon – flights of fancy yields often actual flight, and we wonder why our feet so solidly grind upon the earth!

As one continues to use a wand, or any external focus to perform magical feats, the reliance on such strengthens. It is akin to splinting a broken bone, or using a cane to lean upon, after an injury. Without a careful eye, reliance on those artificial helpmates can extend beyond their logical need. Muscles weaken, then atrophy. Robust bones wither, and grow brittle.

So too, does one's power to focus their own magic. Reliance on a wand, stave or other contaminating focus should be kept to a minimum, for the true sorcerer. Exercise and practice will lessen the feelings of discomfort with the use of wandless magics.

Remember – you are working an unused portion of yourself. Like suddenly taking up swimming, discomfort and a sense of wrongness are often it's shadows. Endure, and persevere.

Settling with a relieved sigh, Harry put away his worry and scrutinized himself.

His casting, and ability to do so wasn't lessened. With very little effort, spells that seemed apt to work, simply did. Those that did not, he didn't force or push. Harry wanted to explore, to do everything this new way, but he was wary of the dangers that changing his entire method of performing magic could bring.

If the text was correct, in that he was learning to focus his magical power internally to achieve the same results, did that not mean, like one's eyes, that ability to focus could tire and weaken with overuse? Frowning, Harry felt perhaps the analogy weren't quite a parallel, but heeded it regardless.

One thing remained to him, and he approached it with some nervousness.

His thoughts on Sirius's Riddle were disturbed by the rather sudden appearance of Tonks from her sleep. His distraction and subsequent injury, had nearly driven those thoughts from his mind. Harry stood, half in and half out of the doorway to his room, debating. "It's waited

this long..." he murmured, and shuffled down the hall, stifling a yawn on his way to meet back up with Tonks.

The cafeteria seemed subdued, but perhaps that was just his view, having made such leaps in discovery the night before. Gray cloaked figures milled about, speaking quietly, voices cast only for the ears of one another. The pleasant ramble in the background of his hearing was a comforting thing, it reminded him of the Great Hall, in Hogwarts.

Thoughts of the school brought to mind the Headmaster, and Harry's expression darkened. Stalling by an empty table, the young wizard took a seat and considered the consequences of his actions, in a wider scope for the first time.

To openly defy Dumbledore, he was essentially endangering his future, in more ways than he first felt. Hogwarts itself would be closed to him, if his current path of defiance stood. Albus would likely use the school as an ultimatum, as a final stroke to ensure his complicity. With a growing sense of dread, Harry realized that if his worst fears were to come to pass, he'd never be able to attend Hogwarts again.

"Knut for your thoughts, Harry?" Snapping out of his reverie, he smiled up at Tonks and shifted, giving her room at the table.

"Just... thinking about the future," he said lamely, a brief shaking of his head following. "Remembering Hogwarts, and wondering if I'll ever see the place again."

Tonks's brow furrowed and she sat her small bowl of fruit down, forgotten. "Why would you not, Harry? I mean, it's Hogwarts. People there love you – your Professors would hunt you down just to assure you of that."

With a smile, Harry shook his head slowly, again, "No, Tonks. I know the Professors would always vouch for me, well minus Snape, but the problem is Dumbledore." He watched as the thoughts he'd had earlier, played back behind her eyes. When the sadness showed through, he nodded, "there, you see. He is intent on using me as a weapon, or shaping me into one. Making me a killer, regardless of my wishes."

"And you are too stubborn to bend for him, to allow him to mold or shape you beyond yourself," Tonks added with a heavy heart. "Oh, Harry... I'm sorry for pulling you along this path –"

Holding up a hand, the young wizard stilled Tonks's apologies. "No, Tonks. This would have happened, maybe in a different fashion, without you." Scooting closer along the bench, he draped an arm around the pretty Auror's shoulders lightly, "And besides, he took his own steps, along a path I can't walk in good conscience. I could deal with the Dursleys, with him invading my privacy and pressing me along, playing me in his game

"But I couldn't have stood by and let get away with abusing you so. Obliviating you, manipulating your memories, and those of the others in the Order most likely." When Tonks looked up, her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. "You are all my friends, I cannot stand by and let anything happen to you, if I have the ability to help."

Sniffling back her tears, Tonks smiled and laughed, remembering something Hermione had said some weeks ago. "That's your 'saving people thing', I was warned about it, but never believed I'd be on the receiving end some how, and here you go basically telling me you'd ride to my rescue, my knight in shining armor."

"More like knight in shabby horror, no one could mistake these hand-offs as armor, Tonks."

Laughing, the two broke the melancholy that had settled over them, and moved on to lighter topics, Harry's new-found skill among them.

"So you finally feel your magic then?" Tonks asked around a mouthful of melon.

Nodding, Harry set aside his bread, still a favorite of the foods provided, and explained the night's discoveries. "And it finally settled, a great, dark tree. I know you explained how magic feels, so this somewhat concerned me, but so far I've not felt any difficulties."

"A tree?" Chewing on the rind of her melon slightly, Tonks considered that imagery and could not fit a parallel. "Well, let me describe mine, if you don't mind."

Harry nodded, helping the Auror to excavate small rounds of melon from her half, earning him a grin.

"Well, for starters, I always see mine as a small stream, a river maybe. As I cast, the more, and more powerfully I do so, the more it becomes taxed," looking up to see Harry's response, she noted a simple acceptance to her description. "Let me give you a hard example."

"Last week, in the Auror training rooms I performed the endurance course. This is a complex practice range and defense program. You cast, counter-curse, and shield, till you fall down. I can last half an hour in there, on a setting of seven out of ten. That's my limit, after that any more complex, powerful spells leaves me winded and seeing spots, usually on my knees."

Blinking a bit, Harry nodded and filed the information away for later. "So... if I'm asking too sensitive a question, let me know, alright? Is that, well, average? For a wizard?"

Grinning a bit, she punched him in the arm. "That's for making the allusion I'm average. And no, it's not really. Aurors get a fair amount of stamina training, and are among the most enduring, if not most powerful, casters you'll meet."

Harry considered that, and felt a slight chill. "I see. Well, I'll need to get a wand to really push myself like that, so maybe we can worry about that later. " Finishing his bread, Harry gestured back to the rooms and motioned for Tonks to join him.

"No, Harry, I'm not going to undress again for you."

Sputtering, Harry tripped on his trainers and nearly mimicked Tonk's earlier stumble.

"Ah, what a brilliant day," Tonks observed, as Harry glared daggers at her in passing.

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"So this is the mysterious Riddle, hmm?" Tonks looked over the simple box, it's lack of latch or lid, and handed it back to Harry with a sniff. "Looks like it just needs a hammer."

Laughing, Harry shook his head quickly, clearing off some space on the foot of his bed. "Oh no, you didn't see what happened when I tried."

Aghast, Tonks swatted at his arm, "You actually took a hammer to a wizard's safe? Are you mad?" Leaning her forehead on her palm, a look of long suffering on her face, she continued when Harry simply shrugged. "Many wizarding puzzles, like this box, are bound with canny traps. One of those is for muggles who are meddling with magic they shouldn't be. Often, those wards are fatal."

"Oh," Harry said, his mind going slightly blank at the possibilities that opened up.

Sighing, Tonks picked the box back up and spun it, end-wise, between the fingers of both hands. "I wager the only reason you're alive, is because Sirius knew you'd be a bit dense in opening it," Smirking a bit, she rolled with the impact of Harry's pillow, and lay the case back across his knees to forestall any further violence. "Why have you waited to open it?"

Shrugging, Harry gave her a sheepish grin, "Well, nearly all those books I had you get for me, and the research that wasn't on my family, had been to open this," taking it up in his hands, he stilled his anxious heart. "I just felt it right for you to be here."

Warmed by his words, Tonks regardless fairly bounced in place, her own anxiousness getting the better of her. "Open it, open it!"

Laughing, the young wizard nodded and closed his eyes. He'd not attempted the unlocking charm, but wanted this to be... memorable. Focusing on the motion, but remaining still, he pictured himself casting the spell and speaking it, all remaining still as stone. As he imagined the casting, he pressed at his magic, feeling the wind within him pick up—

A soft pop brought his focus back to his hands, as Tonks clapped. "Silent too! How hard is it? To do spells like that?"

"I don't really know how to explain it," he answered, slowly pulling the now halved box apart, the top resting beside his outstretched leg. Inside, the box was lined and formed to hold a few small parcels.

Foremost of these caused both present to catch their breath. Tonks pulled herself from her fascination and reached out, running a finger along the wand's length slowly, "It's beautiful," she whispered, as Harry simply nodded in agreement. The shaft was a deep gray, nearing black, that seemed to pale in small whorls where the wood bore knots. It was polished to a high sheen, and was a few inches longer than his own. A third of it's length was handle, which was made obvious by the difference in design. Unlike any other wand he'd seen, this one had a neck of sorts, a fitting just above the handle where it joined the shaft. The wood was the same, and Harry imagined it of one piece, carved masterfully.

"Tonks, is that... metal?" Harry had yet to remove the wand from it's cradle, and pointed out his question by tracing his fingers along the root of the wand, and the neck, where the handle ended.

Nodding, she furrowed her brow slightly, "Never heard of a wand with metal fittings. Wonder how it would cast." Those parts gleamed much like the wood, and bore the same color with a shade of silver.

Harry's eyes finished his appraisal, noting the very faint but detailed carvings along the handle, what looked like birds and a great winged horse, as well as some shadowy dogs or hounds. "It's very well made, I can't believe how well. Where do you think Sirius found such a thing?"

Tonks had to shrug at that, but noticed something that caught her eye, "Harry, look there," pointing she indicated a bit of parchment peeking out from under the wand. "Think it's a note from him?"

"Likely, scoot around so we can read it," he said, and in so doing, pulled free the small folded note.

Congratulations, Pup!

Ah, I wish I could be there to see your face! I am proud of you, as though that wasn't a hard Riddle, the learning to cast as you have is a difficult, and almost unheard of thing. Keep it's secrets close. I'm sure my dear Nymphadora has aided you in her ways, and may even be witness to this gift, and your new talent. Keep it close, Pup, those things dear to you.

You may wonder how I had a wand made for you, and it wasn't me, never worry. No pranks or mischief here. I do admit to using some of the Family talent on the metalwork, as that is a Black specialty. Simple, my boy – I guessed.

Truthfully, I sought out one of the last true Seers of our age, as so few are born in these times. I asked her of you, and she told me nothing. Told me nothing, but gave me this, an order for a wand to have made. And so I did, and enclosed it in the Riddle she herself penned. Confused, I lay awake many nights, wondering at what it meant, but as time wore on and my understanding grew, I knew why.

This, my birthday gift to you;

Elderwood, thirteen inches. Taken from a great dark tree on a lonely isle.

Three strands of Thestral hair, woven and knotted by a blind spinner, who once was a Queen.

The fittings are of meteoric iron, shaped by your favorite Godfather in his Family's tradition.

Use it well. It has no charms on it, and will reject any that are attempted. It'll only answer to you, as I've taken canny steps to ensure only you can master this tool.

Never leave a footstool out at night, and lock your bedroom door, Pup.

On that note, I leave you to your practice, and freedom! Take it and live, my son.

Sirius

"I have to admit, that part about footstools and my bedroom door worries me just a bit," Harry murmured, laughing nervously. Banishing his anxiety, he took up the wand and rather than the sparks or bubbles he's expected, a low, thrumming note seemed to settle into this bones.

Watching with rapt attention, Tonks felt the note and shivered. "What was that?"

Harry rolled his wrist, somewhat tingly from the odd resonance, and gave the wand an experimental flick. "Not sure, but Merlin this thing feels natural."

"Then stop stalling and cast something!" Giggling, Tonks shifted back a bit and watched as Harry looked about their sparse room.

Deciding to clean up the mess from the trunk earlier, which he'd left to go have breakfast, Harry stood and regarded the piles of books, clothes and parcels along the floor. Raising the wand, he pictured what he wanted firmly, and cast the charm. "Pack."

The trunk righted itself, opened, and things fairly flew into it, with an urgency that caused Harry to snicker. No mess or untidy corners, the lot had settled with spare room and a bit more organization than Harry was prone to. Pleased, he grinned and turned to see Tonks looking at him with a strange expression. "What?"

"The closet, Harry."

Turning, he noted that some noise was occurring inside the closed room, and with another flick of his wand the doors were opened. Clothes were writhing about and reorganizing themselves neatly, as their books and shoes bounced about finding places to settle. "Well, overdid it a bit."

Tonks nodded and came to stand beside the young man, "Am I the only one that wants to see what that wand can really do?"

Shaking his head, Harry laughed and watched as Tonks grabbed his arm and nodded. "Then hang on," and with that, the two Apparated from the room.

Harry stumbled and nearly fell as the feeling of being nowhere then pushed back into being forcefully washed over him. "Never get used to that," he mumbled, shaking his head to clear the rattling of his brain.

The quarry they found themselves in was deserted, as it seemed by the cliffs they faced, all useful stone had been mined back into granite and chalk. The bowl was steep, and rose some distance away back up and over them, reminding Harry of nothing so much as the World Cup stadium he'd been in, during fourth year. They'd Apparated near one of the gentler sloping walls, and he found Tonks taking out her wand with a glint in her eye.

Matching her, Harry turned to the hewn stone and readied himself. "Let me see what a blasting curse from an Auror can do," he taunted, turning to the stone and raising his wand.

Tonks answered with a stabbing motion and a murmured "Confringo."

Stone and soil imploded at the impact of her curse, blowing meters up into the air and showering the surrounding area in debris and a fine dust. "Not so bad, feels good to get out and stretch my wand arm a bit," she sighed, a happy smile on her face. "Your turn!"

Nodding, Harry dropped into a casting stance and focused his magic, feeling the wind within him pick up. Branches creaked in his mind, as he raised his wand and with a thrust, "Confringo!"

When his ears had stopped ringing, Harry coughed and tried to clear the dust from his mouth. The bitter scent of powdered rock surrounded him and he looked about frantically for his companion. "Tonks, Tonks! Are you alright?"

Motion to his side caught his attention, as Tonks waved her wand about, banishing the dust away from her to clear some breathable air. "Harry, what the devil was that?"

"I... I thought," Shaking his head with a sigh he put the wand away and moved to Tonks's side, as she cleaned some more space free of the choking dust. "Must have aimed badly," he murmured, looking to his feet.

The young Auror rubbed the dust from her eyes finally, and set up a wind charm to clear the air. What greeted them leaved Harry stunned and Tonks somewhat frightened. "Harry..."

The quarry wall she'd cast her spell on had suffered a fair impact from her spell. A mass of rock and stone and soil the size of a table's face had been blasted apart, taking scrap and scree from the surrounding area in it's violence.

That same wall now looked as if it had been the target of a dozen such curses, all hitting it at once. A space the size of their quarters with the Unspeakables was blasted free, and the weight above it was causing more debris to fall and cascade into the void. With a startled yelp Tonks grabbed Harry and put up an unfamiliar shielding charm, as a moment later small, and not so small, rocks came falling at them from the sky. "I saw you cast the Confringo curse, but this is... different. Very different."

Nodding, Harry felt for his magic and the comforting solidity of that tree answered, same as it had earlier. "Maybe I cast it wrong?"

Snorting, Tonks shook her head. "It looks like a Bombarda was cast on it. Lets experiment a bit," and so saying, pulled Harry along to an unbroken bit of wall, a number of yards away. Harry was still a bit shaken by the violence of his last casting, and so was hesitant to do

much more. Tonks's urging helped, but he was still less than enthusiastic about the prospect.

"You know the Reductor curse of course, so let's try that one. Range on it goes foul at thirty meters, so stand here," positioning Harry, she stood to the side a few arm lengths off and nodded to him. "Cast till you feel a bit worn, alright?"

Nodding, Harry settled himself and focused on the task at hand. He began slowly, but reaching within he found a rhythm, a balance to the motion of his magic. It was simple really, when he thought on it. He remembered watching the trees by the lake, at Hogwarts in the fall. The wind would pull at their trunks, and in time they'd begin to sway, bending with the wind. He bent with that rhythm as well, and his voice was a chant, timed to the wind in those great boughs.

A gentle hand on his shoulder startled him and broke him from the trance. "Ah, sorry. Seemed to have zoned off."

"Harry... how much longer could you have done that?"

Looking at the wall, as he'd been rather unseeing of it for most of his time casting, Harry noted less of the violence from his last attempt. Powdered stone still set up a fog near the wall, but there was no fall of scree or debris to hide from. "I don't know, I'd just gotten started really –"

Tonks took him by the shoulder and searched his eyes steadily, looking for something. "No, Harry. You were casting for nearly twenty minutes straight." His eyes snapped to the wall again, and he noted the subtle difference, now. His spells had obliterated a good number of feet of stone, and the gentle bowl of its loss bowed into the greater mass. "I want you to see something."

She pointed to a large, fallen boulder, likely having washed free since the quarry's abandonment some time in the past. "Watch what happens with me cast the spell, as powerfully as I can."

Tonks stepped away and took a breath, smiling at him in apology, "Sorry, but to do this I need to do something first." And so said, she

cast a Disillusionment on herself and faded from view. Shortly after a sonorous voice spoke "Reducto," and the spell blasted free a chair-sized hunk of stone from the house-sized boulder, reducing it to gravel.

She came back into view, and Harry raised a brow in question. "I'm sorry, but I have to drop my Metamorph changes to properly channel all my power into something. I don't do it often, so you got a bit of a treat.

"Now, I want you to do the same. Focus like you did with the Confringo, and cast a Reductor at that boulder. I want you to see the difference." Again she stepped back and gave Harry some room.

Taking a stilling breath, Harry focused and instead of letting a rhythm build inside him, he let a harsh wind rip and pull at the leaves and branches. His skin itched and it felt as if the reaching, barky arms inside him were gripping at his chest more tightly. The feeling almost grew too much to bear, and he let the spell fly with a shout of "Reducto!"

Gaping, he watched a third of the great stone blast free and the shrapnel from the spell's impact hit the far wall, causing small slides of stone. The remaining mass was smooth and looked long-worn by a river or sea, and he blinked at the sheer destructive force he'd loosed.

"I felt that, felt myself cast that time," stretching, he noted the quiet within him, as the tree withdrew from him slightly. The difference was slight, but there. "I felt that."

"You felt it?" Tonks boggled at him incredulous, "do you have any idea how much power you put into that? You were fairly glowing, Harry! You nearly had an aura from what you were doing."

Her words didn't impact him so much as the look of awe and fear on her face, and Harry drew away, turning his back to her, "Tonks... I don't care about that." Years of being either a hero or villain in the eyes over everyone who knew him opened up old scars under her eyes. Last year, with everyone calling him liar over the return of Voldemort. The year before, during the Triwizard and his ostracism in

the eyes of the other Houses as well as his own. Ron... He turned to ask her what it all meant, why she had such fear in her eyes, but when saw her face, turned with worry and fear and pity something inside him snapped, "Don't look at me like that!"

Taken aback, Tonks dropped the hand she would have laid on his shoulder, seeing him in some dark thought. She watched him struggle free of it and turn, his eyes gone cold and still. "Are we done here, Tonks?" Nodding quietly she hesitantly reached out and took hold of his sleeve, Apparating back to their quarters with a muffled crack.

Arriving, Harry said nothing, merely throwing his new wand on his bed and stalking from the room. Lost, Tonks stood and just looked after him, not sure what to say, or even if she should try. She instead sat upon her bed and let her mind wander, laying back and closing her eyes.

Harry's new wand, not that she'd say such, seemed practically a Dark Artifact. Thestrals weren't evil, so much as just their own beast, but the natural glamor of death on them was worrisome. But three hairs, where even Unicorn hair wands used a single strand? Add to that the odd circumstances behind the weaving of them... Coupled with wood from an Elder, which even she knew was long ago removed from the art of wandcraft. As if all that were not enough, he had to add in metal! Unnatural metal at that!

After reading a bit of the book on wandless magic, she'd tried her hand at it briefly, but with very limited results. Small useless things seemed to work for her, but little else. The tax on her magic was wearying, as well. That Harry could set his trunk to winging about the room so idly concerned her more than a little.

The quarry was it's own basket of troubles. Merlin, he had power! Power to spare, and then some. All this time, he didn't even know it, from what she'd gathered from his mutterings before finding his magic. How much of that ignorance of himself was fostered by his living conditions? How little must Harry consider his own talent, to have never pressed to find it?

All these revelations, all results of a simple letter, she delivered.

"Sirius, what have we done," she murmured, before the darkness behind her eyelids claimed the young Auror to sleep.

Standing at the end of the dormitory hall, Harry looked down at his hands, his eyes clouded with memories. "What cost, freedom, Sirius?" he'd murmured, shaking his head slowly.

He despised all things that set him apart from everyone else. In the beginning, the wizarding world had been a fairytale refuge, but soon even that proved an illusion. Each year some new terror haunted him, preyed on his friends, on him. The Dursleys were little to nothing worth worrying on in the face of something like Voldemort or his Death Eaters. His hopes to recreate himself in that world died a violent death.

Each thing different about him, put him a step further away from living a simple, happy life. A life he chose, for once. He could no more be a muggle, anonymous and unseen as he could be a wizard who was. He had no muggle skills or talents. Being kept in the dark and locked away so long, Harry had barely any idea what muggle jobs were.

And perish any idea of going to ground in the wizarding world. His scar would be a clarion to anyone who'd heard of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry rested his head on the cool stone, and closed his eyes for long minute, till he felt a small hand on his shoulder. He knew it wouldn't be Tonks, she... felt different, as he'd explained once. "Hello, am I disturbing anyone?"

"No, Harry. You simply seem disturbed," the cloaked woman said, bending low to peer up at him. "What tells on you so?"

"Myself, apparently," he answered with some scorn. "It seems impossible for me to live a normal life. Everything must be battles, or intrigue, or plot." Grousing about his issues wasn't his way, but Harry tried to explain things to offer some clarity. "Ever since I was young, my life was a battle. To get away from bullies, or do just well enough to satisfy myself, but avoid the angry eyes of my warders.

"Then, I come to the wizarding world, and I'm a celebrity. I'm either loved and lauded as some kind of hero and savior or reviled and plotted against for my life," shaking his head slowly, Harry took a calming breath. He'd waited for his host to interject, interrupt his rambling but she remained still. "Now, it seems even I complicate it, with my magic being as it is, and a skill with wandless casting."

She seemed to consider his words a moment, before laughing quietly. Forestalling his angry question, the woman patted his shoulder lightly. "But Harry, what would you do with a normal life, now? If you had one, from the start, perhaps you could best appreciate it's slow appeal, and mundane charms... but you aren't slow, or mundane." The cloak tilted slightly, and he could imagine her smiling beneath the gray hood. "You are, and always will be, Harry Potter. He may change, but what makes him, will remain. I for one, do not see that man being content with a mundane, slow life." Moving away she straightened, and bowed ever so slightly, "If my words were out of place, I offer my apologies. I have been asked to remind you, that extended trips abroad are... cautioned against. Seek me out, before so, if you are to be gone some time again."

Turning, she went back to her tasks, leaving a stunned and unsure Harry Potter in her wake. A smile slowly crept along his face as he laughed once, a barking sound that reminded him of Sirius. "What would I do, indeed?" Wearing a familiar grin, he loped back to his shared quarters, and Tonks.

For the second time that day, Tonks woke to Harry causing some commotion in their room. "Oi, time's it?"

"About an hour till dinner, you slept through lunch, dear," he quipped, earning him a pillow to the face. Unlike last time, she noted him practicing with his wand, rather than wandlessly.

Sitting up, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and warily looked over the young man before her. He looked older this afternoon, than he did in the morning. Something about his eyes, some depth and understanding that had settled there. "Harry, are you alright," she finally asked, watching him transfigure and then charm a cup to fly

about the room on its own wings. As she watched it, she noted the flock of the things above them, and worried at their contents.

Nodding, he stood and came to her side of the room, and she motioned him to sit. "I'm sorry about earlier. I have difficulties dealing with the oddities of my life some days." Smiling slowly, he sat and heaved a great breath, "I'm working on it. So much has happened, recently, in the last few years. I feel sometimes I'll lose myself in the strong currents that seem to batter at me.

"I'm trying. I'm sorry for losing my patience, at you."

"Understandable," she mumbled, leaning back into her pillow with a stifled yawn. "I am worried though, Harry. Will you hear me out?" At his brief nod, she continued. "That wand is practically dark, but it's a fine line. There was a time that dragon heartstring was considered dark, as it required the beast to be killed to get at it.

"I know the wand isn't dark, but it leans it. Just be careful. If you'll let me, maybe tomorrow we can do some more tests." Having said her peace, Tonks smiled and opened her arms, waving him closer. "Now, give us a hug, so we can go back to being mates, and not avoiding one another."

Laughing quietly, Harry complied and a weight seemed to lift from his heart. He realized his error, then. Tonks wasn't worried because of him – but for him. Returning the embrace warmly, he pulled back and smiled. "Better."

"Much. Now, let's get back to work, we still have some other tasks to finish, before the reading, and time grows short," back in her Auror mode, Harry had to chuckle as he was swept along behind her, back to the library and their search for his family home.

Harry had summoned their host, becoming more used to calling on her in that peculiar way, and chatted with Tonks about Apparating and being out of the shielding Halls for long periods. The cloaked woman had suggested they wear obscuring cloaks, and a charm that would make it impossible to Portkey or forcibly Apparate them. Tonks seemed to boggle at those items, till it was explained they were very

hard to make, and burned out rather quickly, 'outside the influence of the place they were made'. The charms were small lumps of formless black rock, on slender silver chains. The two gratefully took them, as well as a pair of gray cloaks, that fit them.

"You cannot, by an ancient Geis, claim to be an Unspeakable while wearing our robes," their host explained, and Tonks raised a brow. Harry could feel the smirk coming off the slight form before them though. "Not that anyone ever questions us."

The afternoon's research was less that, than collecting copies of law and statements of precedence, for other cases. They'd found a number of loopholes, of various sizes, that would allow them the ability to counter most arguments leveled against them. What was left undone, was simply the few facts needed to close up the knots. Tonks went down a small list she'd set up, checking each with her wand and filing the relevant copy into a small box as she went.

"So, here's the file for precedent by financial independence.

"Claimant form for Emancipation by Age, pending proof of Scottish birth.

"Case 145.8, Ministry vs. Hawthorne, minutes and transcription.

"Case 156.2, Hawthorne vs. Farthing, minutes and transcription.

"File stating your live birth and parentage.

"And finally, Proof of Viability of Magical Inheritance, as per Ministry mandate. Phew, quite a lot just for a room full of stuffy old bastards after Sirius's money, don't you think?"

Harry chuckled, but nodded as he looked over the full box with a satisfied air. "Now, all that remains, is a trip to Gringott's. Think we can get it done before they finish the bread?"

Tonks snorted and took Harry's hand, tucking the box under her arm, "I'd like to see the Goblins keep you from it." The soft crack of Apparation was the last sound they made to the empty library.

Chapter Five.

It pays to be obvious, especially if you have a reputation for subtlety.
–Isaac Asimov

An odd thought stole over Harry as he and Tonks slipped along Diagon, its colors blushing in the late midday. Riddles. He was driven by one, a man who denied his name, to a destiny he had not asked for. Another Riddle had recently offered itself up as a key to his freedom. More and more, those complex questions had arisen. As Harry passed Flourish and Blott's he tugged at Tonks's sleeve, and they pulled to the side of the thoroughfare.

"I was thinking of writing some letters while I'm able, and seeing about setting the post through Gringott's, do you think that would be alright?"

Nodding, Tonks had actually had the same thought, but a notion brought her up short. "Harry, what happened to Hedwig?"

Grinning a bit, he shook his head slowly. "She's off with Luna, who's with her father out in Scandinavia I believe. I sent her off that night, by a lucky chance." Looking about the alley, he pressed back and drew Tonks with him into the shade of one of the many café umbrellas. Looking behind her discreetly, the Auror noted a number of her former colleagues passing down the main walk.

After they'd passed, Harry seemed to relax and leaned close, "Hedwig won't come back till I mail Luna about it, which I was planning on after the Reading. Perhaps I'll extend Hedwig's vacation. Besides, she mentioned something about needing a white owl for something, so it all worked out splendidly." They turned and stole back up the street some small distance, to Scribbulus Everchanging Inks, where Harry purchased some parchment and a self-inking quill that apparently had caught on quite well from Fred and George's shop.

Stowing the parcels into a pocket of his robe, as Tonks did the same, they continued up to the intersection of Knockturn and Diagon, and the great pillared entranceway of Gringott's. Tonks was quietly

impressed with Harry's poise, as they had come up quite brazenly along the walk without much harassment. He seemed to take to intrigue as if he'd taken classes in it at Hogwarts.

The two ducked into the small cove of Knockturn and Harry again pulled Tonks to the side. "Once we're inside, we'll have to drop our hoods. I don't know what Dumbledore's done about your status, but the worst I think that can be done about me is a note that I'm there. I'm missing, but he still needs me to be amicable." When Tonks nodded warily, he grinned and pulled his wand. "I'm going to charm the robe Auror blue, but don't drop the hood, till we're inside, and someone asks."

"Alright Harry, but for the record?" When he nodded she cuffed him on the arm. "I'm the one who's supposed to be protecting you."

Grinning, he shifted the color of her cloak and stowed his new wand, leaving his original Holly one conspicuously apparent in his pocket. "Then, lets go."

Striding up, by all appearances as an Auror and Unspeakable, the pair entered the bank and passed between the two bored but observant Goblin guard. While some wizards turned to look at them, most did not, and it seemed no Goblins at all paid them a bit of notice. Harry noticed the head teller's desk and moved forward, noting that none stood there in queue, for which he was thankful. His small skill in Occlumency, which he was using to little benefit to assist his patience, was tested as they stood for a long minute, waiting for one of the Goblins to attend them. Curiously it was a human, and a wizard that greeted them finally.

"Good day, does the Ministry have business that we can arbitrate today?"

Harry's eyes widened in shock, as he realized the gravity of the error he'd bought into. He motioned the clerk a bit closer, and whispered severely that anything said must stay between the two of them, and receiving a nod from the man, dropped his hood. The wizard's eyes immediately widened, and Harry hushed him frantically a moment before the man's demeanor calmed. "Alright, now that we've settled

that, I need to access my family records. Who or where must I go to do so?"

"I'll need to summon one of the Goblins, as it's only Ministry business I'm able to arbitrate. Speaking of Ministry business, I must ask why you're impersonating an Unspeakable, Mr. Potter."

"I never said I was. I'm simply wearing a gray cloak with an obscuring charm, for much the very reason you showed me, when I dropped it." Leaning across the table slightly, he grinned at the man as he connected the dots. "Can you imagine every passer-by stopping and pointing at you, were you out buying a friend a gift?"

Chuckling the man nodded once and hit a button on his desk, before bowing and dismissing himself. As the man walked off, Tonks sidled up to him and nudged him gently, "You owe your friend a gift."

"Git." Raising his hood again, Harry stood and waited quietly, as this time a rather severely dressed Goblin stepped up and with the press of a button, sat upon a rising chair that moved to bring him to eye level.

Dark of skin, the Goblin fairly blended into the burnished wood of the booth, but for his gleaming, cunning eyes. The short-statured man regarded them through his glasses, severely arched brows upon his sloping forehead rising high upon his head. "Mr. Potter. I see your trip abroad has ended sooner than planned?"

"Trip abroad?" Harry questioned, as the Goblin's mouth cracked into a smile. The young man's bemusement only grew when the Goblin seemed to expect his confusion.

Working a small switch, the teller nodded, "Indeed. It's been all over the Prophet, that you've decided to spend the summer visiting abroad, doing something equally unbelievable and newsworthy, I'm sure." Apparently done with whatever he was arranging, the Goblin turned his attention fully to Harry, "and a memorable trip I'm sure it was. Now, how may Gringott's assist you today?"

Blinking in confusion, he noticed the Goblin pressing a button that raised a semi-translucent boundary around the booth, which Harry initially started at. His hand went to his wand, but stilled as he noticed the nature of the thing, and Tonk's hand on his shoulder. "Relax, it's just a privacy screen. May I?" Nodding, he stepped back as Tonks dropped her hood and addressed the Goblin.

"We're here for research, today. Is there a place we can go speak where we can access some of Harry's records?"

If the Goblin's brow rose any further, Harry worried he'd need to get a broom to find it, "And you are?"

Grimacing, the woman produced her Vault Stamp and stated her name, "Nymphadora Cassiopeia Tonks." Placing the stamp and her wand tip to a parchment, the Goblin nodded as a small signature, Tonks's own name, appeared.

Running a clawed finger along the small slip of parchment, it promptly flashed up into smoke and ash. "So you are. Mr. Potter, I assume the business you are perusing is party to Ms. Tonks, and we have your permission to open sensitive informations and matters to her attention?"

Looking from one to another, he nodded woodenly.

"Very good. Please hold onto the large brass bar," and with another press of a button, the entire booth seemed to shift back into the wall, and the pair proceeded to grip the bar frantically as it was made apparent that the head teller's booth also had the same tendencies as the Vault carts. A frantic minute was had, punctuated by Tonks whooping and having entirely too much fun for Harry's tastes. A minute more of gut-wrenching drops and twists, and the three slowed to a stop, the booth neatly spinning and depositing them into a small room.

"This is a solicitor's chamber. A staff Goblin will be by shortly to assist you with your questions," and in so saying, the booth retreated, giving them the impression of a carriage upon a top as it spun and rocketed back toward the bank floor.

Feeling the weight of earth between himself and the sun, Harry started pacing, looking pensive. "Can we trust them not to just... well. Something?"

Chuckling a bit, Tonks reclined in one of the provided chair, looking unconcerned. "Harry, what do you know of the Goblins?"

Stopping in his nervous walk, the young man considered the question for a few moments. "Somewhat friendly, rather bright and canny, good with money and traps and security." Glancing back at the sealed and blank wall that had admitted them, he grinned, "good magical artificers as well."

Nodding to each point, Tonks also added a few of her own. "Wickedly clannish, innately magical when it comes to metal and earthwork, cunning wardsmiths. They're a nation of their own, but most wizards think them servant class. In response to that, outside their own interests, which rarely mirror that of the Ministry, they could give less of a damn about you or me." Snorting, she stretched and rolled her neck a moment. "Where their interests do lie, they defend them viciously."

"Nation of their own," Harry noted, eyes narrowing a moment. "Then why do wizards trust them with their money? Could they not just... lock the doors some day, and retreat here, to these warrens and tunnels?"

Shrugging, Tonks grinned at him, "No idea. I'm not really too swift on Goblin politics and process."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance then," a rather deep voice interrupted, and the two started as a section of stone seemed to unmelt behind a Goblin that had entered the room as silently as a whisper. "Forgive me, but the conversation was interesting, and I was unable to... knock, as it were."

Harry moved hesitantly to the Goblin, and extended his hand politely, "Harry Potter, pleasure to meet you, sir."

He got a familiar raising of eyebrows, but the Goblin seemed to inspect his hand a moment before giving him one of those disturbingly toothy smiles. "Ah, a shaking of hands. Forgive me if I don't indulge you Mr. Potter, but as you can see –" the Goblin held up his own hand, and Harry noted the rather wicked claws he bore. "We can't really extend a friendly gesture, in the way you intend."

Harry laughed and nodded, but shortly tilted his head slightly. "I didn't catch your name, sir?"

"Ah, my apologies. Unused to one insisting on names, outside of the Teller's floor. My name is Vorgann, archivist and secretary to Ragnok, Dvalinnsynir."

Tonks's head rotated to face him, a blank look on her face. "One has risen to claim that title then?"

Vorgann smiled, and Harry could not tell if the gesture was to be pleasant or not. "Indeed. Ragnok has proven, by means of blood, stone and gold that he is the rightful Dvalinnsynir." At Harry's bemused glances between the two, their host gestured for a him to sit. "A moment, since you seem curious.

"Goblins and Dwarves are of, generally speaking, a single blood. One deals with the surface people, one refuses. For long ages, the Goblin Nation has been the... public face, of the combined peoples. The Dvergar. Recently, a Goblin of some prominence has risen and shown a prowess in both business and politics, and established for the first time in many lifetimes, the single bloodline."

Apparently done with his explanation, Vorgann gestured to Harry, and sat back upon his own chair, waiting. Trying to absorb the deluge of information, Harry took a calming breath and gestured to Tonks, who restored the box of files to it's normal size. "Let me explain my problem..."

Half an hour of outlining Harry's plight passed, where Tonks and Harry briefed the Goblin solicitor on the situation. "So, with that in mind, our next step is to find out where Harry was born," Tonks concluded, repacking some of the key files back into the box.

Vorgann seemed to regard the two quietly, before speaking, "I am afraid, that as the current situation with the Potter House Vault and the seal upon your parent's Will, I cannot release to you that information," the Goblin held up a clawed hand as the two nearly leapt to their feet in outrage. He seemed to stare forward unseeing a moment, before a small grin curled one of his lips. "Let me confirm some things, to ensure that I am clear.

"Harry Potter, if of age of majority, will withdraw from the care of one Albus P. W. B. Dumbledore and his guardianship, and assume the full responsibility of both his own and any described Estates, given in the Will of one Sirius Black, which we, the Sovereign Goblin Nation have been tasked with the insurance and dispensation of." Taking some iron filings from a small pouch in his pocket, the Goblin pulled forth a sheet of supple looking silver, and spread the filings upon it. With a touch of Vorgann's thumb, the filings aligned in a language he couldn't read, and seemed to heat and melt as an engraving upon it.

Waiting for a confirmation or denial, the Goblin stilled, as Harry tried to fathom what precisely he was agreeing to, other than his own intent. "Ah. Yes, that is my goal. You said that I was the ward of Albus Dumbledore? Does that maybe have something to do with the sealing and state of the Will, you mentioned?"

Vorgann nodded, addressing him with less formal tones, "Yes, he assumed guardianship, under the methods by which your Estates went into Stewardship."

Shaking her head slowly, Tonks motioned to their paperwork, having enchanted her quill to take notation. "I really don't like the way this is starting to sound, Harry."

"Neither do I," sighing, Harry asked Vorgann to continue.

Their solicitor bowed and in the same formal voice, continued, "Amendment; Harry James Potter, Heir to House Potter, affirms his intent to assume his legal and financial emancipation before this Dvergar, Vorgann, Liegeman of Ragnok Dvalinnsynir." So stating in a grave voice, the Goblin turned to him with a smile. "Now, one final

dispensation to be done with. Due to the nature of the... guardianship that has been worked upon you, we cannot release the totality of your family holdings, the Potter Estate, to you, assumptive of your emancipation or not."

With a startled gasp, Tonks leaned forward, looking scandalized, "But, why? What restrictions upon his guardianship as you said, could possibly restrict that?"

"The House Potter had placed upon one Albus P. W. B. Dumbledore the mantle of Steward. That power cannot be removed, except by the Heir, by their own hand and power," the Goblin replied, his smile fading. "It is an ancient and unusual situation, one that predates common wizarding law and calls upon more basic, primal ideals."

"I'd be lying if I said I understood," Harry added, his voice unsure in the face of what apparently had been done. "So, how did my parent make him guardian and Steward?"

"Trust, and blood," the Goblin replied, as if that were all the explanation that was needed. "A combination of a number of factors, activated an ancient circumstance." Rolling the silvery sheet between his wicked claws, the Goblin sat it upon the table and seemed to forget it. "There is the difficulty, now we can move on to how to get around it.

"Dumbledore sealed the Will of your parents, on the assumption that you would never question that seal. As it stands, with him as your guardian and holder of your legal rights, only he can voice such a question. Therein lies your opportunity, as his position is a conflict of interests." Lacing his fingers, Vorgann leaned back in his chair. "One cannot restrict oneself, in such a way, as it negates all previous seals and limitations.

"Unfortunately, I cannot simply tell you how to access the Will. You must figure that one out yourself. I have noted all the relevant information, I simply await the proper authorization. We as a neutral party, are unable to take a stance for any of our represented parties, only to arbitrate the statement of the agreements, pending." With a lopsided smirk, the Goblin took out now a golden sheet, and spread what seemed to be silvery filings upon it. "I await your next step."

Harry sat gobsmacked and looked, utterly lost to Tonks. "I have no idea what to say to that." Reaching up, he removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with thumb and finger. "Tonks, what do we do? I mean, it's not as important to release my parent's Will right now, but this is more than a little disturbing. If the only way to get at my birthplace is in that Vault though, we have to open it."

"Agreed. I had no idea Dumbledore had such a hand in your family's House," she murmured quietly. "Vorgann, we may be needing a moment to deliberate on this, is that allowable?"

Nodding slightly, the Goblin simply remained seated, his hands spread upon the golden sheet. "Take what time you need. This is not a matter of small consequence."

"Thank you," she murmured. Turning back to Harry, she spread her hands out and shook her head. "I really don't know, Harry. It's another Riddle."

Agreeing grudgingly, he sat back into his chair, and thought back over the situation. "Vorgann, you said that Dumbledore's position is a conflict of interests." When the Goblin nodded, Harry continued. "Let me reason it like this. He holds the key to a cage, that only he can open, and can only do so at my request. Within that cage, is a way to allow me to hold that key." Considering his words, the Goblin gave a hesitant nod. "Alright. Now, his power to hold the key, is contingent on my agreement that he should hold that key." Harry mulled over the situation, always setting back down in the same place.

"I keep getting stuck at the part where only he can voice my right to question him," he admitted, as Tonks rubbed at her temples lightly. "Any thoughts?"

Laughing mirthlessly, the Auror only quirked a brow at him. "Only that if we don't hurry, there won't be any bread left in the cafeteria."

Harry groaned and let his head fall upon the table. "You had to remind me." As he lay with his head against the cold stone, the young

wizard thought carefully about the Goblin's words. "Negates... Vorgann. Why did you not say that it was so simple?"

"I am bound by Geis to only arbitrate and uphold agreements. At this point, I can do nothing to work either for or against you, outside of discussing the agreements, and the condition of them." Smiling, he readied his hands over the golden sheet.

"I request access to the Will." Harry stated simply, as Tonks tilted her head quizzically.

"Granted," Vorgann said and swiped his hand across the sheet, the filings assembling themselves in neat script. "Understand this does not affect the land and all Estates and Holdings beyond these walls. Albus Dumbledore's role as Steward must be removed by you and you alone."

Nodding, Harry looked curiously at the sheet Vorgann held. "Does this affect my earlier issue in any way?" Tonks looked back and forth between the two as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"Oh... " Laughing briefly, she regarded Vorgann from behind her shock of pink hair. "You are a canny one, I see now. Remind me never to play Riddle games with Goblins."

"Master of old found us rather challenging opponents," the swarthy skinned solicitor stated proudly. "Sadly few Masters have risen, and fewer still seek us out." Harry had nearly asked about what the Goblin had meant, when Vorgann nodded and pressed a small button upon the desk. "Send me Griphook," he said simply, before turning back to Harry. "We were restricted by the same Geis to release no information, regarding the Estate and it's location, to anyone but the Heir upon his assumption of the Will and it's dispensation. We shall simply need to wait for it to be delivered."

As they paused, waiting for Griphook to arrive, Harry replayed the previous hour in his mind. Again Dumbledore. Again with lies, half truths and manipulations. "He's playing a very careful game, Isn't he?" As neither party to his statement could tell to whom he was speaking, neither answered. "If there is one thing I've learned about

Albus, it's that he never does anything, anything idly. Something about my family Estate has his interest." Leaning back, he rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Leverage against me to be his tool. Perhaps it has some Artifact he needs, or needed... Power. Always power."

Snarling, Harry slammed his hands into the table in a rare show of anger, "Damn it, why? What all these games, this web of lies and manipulation?" Reaching up, he rubbed at a temple in much the same way as Tonks earlier. "Is he that desperate to keep me under his thumb?"

Quietly, Griphook came and with a small conversation in Gobbledegook, left again to a task. "Griphook will be retrieving the relevant informations, as they are now released to you." Taking a deep breath, the Goblin shook his grizzled head slowly. "If it were not for the... irony of it all, I'd be offended by the man who placed you in this position, Mr. Potter."

"Harry. Just call me Harry. I have an allergy to titles." Chuckling, the Goblin nodded once in acknowledgment. Considering his words a moment, Harry's eyes narrowed. "Irony... Trust. I see. The 'ancient laws' you mentioned, allow for him to gain his position by the trust of my parents. Yet he shows me none."

"You have struck the metal true, Harry."

With a weary sigh, Tonks stretched and stood, working out the stiffness in her back from sitting too long. "He really is a petty, unpleasant old man, isn't he?"

"Even I, as neutral as I must seem, am not fond of him, or his politics," Vorgann added, tapping at the golden sheet lightly.

Raising a brow, Tonks leaned closer, curiosity showing in her eyes, "Do tell? I know Fudge has been working to restrict and lessen the rights of Goblins, but he's the only one being credited for it."

"Ms. Tonks, politics is never a simple matter of 'he said, and did'. It is always a grand web, that embroils many. There is no such thing as

'simple politics', within civilized societies," with a smirk, the Goblin sighed and propped a foot up on the table. "Goblins, on the other hand, have a simple government."

"Do tell," Harry prompted, organizing the paperwork idly.

"As I said before, Ragnok has proven himself Dvalinnssynir which to us is like saying Emperor to you, by three criteria." Holding up a clawed hand, the Goblin counted them off, "Blood – personal combat. Stone – His holdings and ability are unrivaled. Gold – Ragnok's power and influence are a thing of legend. Within the Goblin Nation, a rise to power is simple.

"Kill your predecessor, and get away with it, while not getting yourself lynched by their loyalists."

Snorting, Tonks broke into gales of laughter. "Simple he says, hah."

"What knowledge lies under the earth rarely sees the sun, Ms. Tonks," the grave tone Vorgann took caught Harry's ear, and he leaned closer to better hear. "Often, men who seek power, and gain it, lose themselves to it's intricacies. Power begets power. It sustains itself in volume. Think of a drop of water, upon glass." Smiling, the solicitor turned directly to Harry and bowed slightly, acknowledging his attention. "As time passes, small droplets move together, merge and grow. So is the dynamic of power."

Presently Griphook returned, with two scrolls of parchment. "Vorgann, the things you asked for." Their solicitor voiced his thanks and the smaller Goblin left, with barely a glance to the two wizards.

"Now, on to questions answered," Vorgann announced, unrolling the first scroll. "It would seem, that you have another argument, to add to your list to assert Harry's emancipation."

"As if at this point, I don't have enough?" Harry laughed, shaking his head. "What has he done now? I can't imagine something else that would possibly lessen his image in my eyes further."

Holding up the scroll, Vorgann cocked an eyebrow. "Do you know what this is, Harry?" When the young man signaled a negative, the Goblin smiled in a way Harry could not imagine to be pleasant. "It is a record of all access to and from your House Vault.

"Did you know that for the last fourteen years, you've been financially supporting a known Death Eater, one Severus Snape?"

Harry went deathly still, and his eyes snapped to Vorgann's with an intensity that Tonks had only seen once. She's seen it when Harry chased after her Aunt Bellatrix after Sirius's death in the Ministry. "Explain how that is possible."

Nodding, the solicitor sat the scroll down and regarded Harry evenly. "As Steward to your House, Dumbledore could make dispensation based on approved precedents. Compensation to relatives, family servants, or as compensation for services rendered."

"Snape had never done a service to my family, that deserved their support," hissing his words, Harry felt his knuckles whitening from grip he had on the edge of the table. So this is how Dumbledore repaid his parent's trust – by deceiving their son, then bankrolling a known Death Eater? A supporter of the man who killed them both and made him an orphan?

A motion from Tonks caught his eye and he turned to her, trying to soften his glare. "What do you think?" He asked tightly, attempting to school his voice, keep it civil.

"I think we should check to see if any other mutual friends of Albus's familiar are on that list," she said, Harry understanding her allusion immediately.

Running a hand along his face wearily, Harry motioned for the list and sighed. "Can I get an up to date, and updating copy of that list?"

"Of course, take this one." Handing the scroll to the young man, the Goblin picked up the second roll and hefted it slowly. "The list you have, will update itself to any further accesses to the Vault. With you assuming control, we can –"

"A moment, Vorgann." Rising, Harry moved to Tonk's side, kneeling so as to speak with her privately. "If we close him off from this, he would be aware of me moving to reclaim my family's Estates," closing his eyes wearily, Harry leaned on her chair for support. "Until such time as I can rip everything from his control, utterly, I want him completely unaware."

Biting her lip, Tonks had to agree with his logic. "Makes sense. If he were warned, he would find a way to defend his stance, or possibly use them as leverage. If he'd use Hogwarts, as you fear, then he could use this too." With a grim nod, she showed her agreement to his plan.

"Vorgann," Harry called, gathering the Goblin's attention. "Can I leave the Vault as it is, with Dumbledore having the same access till some later time?"

Shrugging, the Goblin nodded an affirmative. "Of course, if you wish."

"Then make it so." Turning, he sat again and picked up the second scroll, undoing the seal that he'd come to recognize as that of his House, and looking over its contents. "Ah... perfect. Absolutely perfect. Tonks?"

"Hm?" Watching Harry's malicious smile, she knew something good, relative to their plans of course, had to be contained within.

Looking over the map, Harry could feel the draw of it. He knew the place, the location of his family's holdings. He'd been so close, at Hogwarts yet just far enough for it to have never caught him and forced its remembrance. "Fancy a trip at the end of the month?" Pulling at a second scroll, he unfurled it to see a completed and signed Birth Certificate, and smiled at his parent's names.

His mood and smile infectious, Tonks felt her own growing, as well as a sense of eagerness. "Where to, Harry?"

"Overlooking the Loch of Skene to the east, Aberdeenshire. Scotland."

Rushing to his side, the pretty young Auror threw her arms around his neck and gave him a sound kiss on the cheek, "Brilliant! Absolutely so! This means that everything we've been working for, all the research wasn't for nothing!" Beaming, she read over the scroll from her position by Harry's shoulder, ignorant to the fierce blush rising along his neck and cheeks.

Vorgann's gravelly chuckle roused them from the scrutiny of the map of lands and Estate before them, "One last thing remains, for me to discuss with you, Harry.

"It pertains to the Will to be read soon, and your position as primary beneficiary within." Harry's mood visibly darkened, but he nodded for the solicitor to continue. "As you may be aware, the passing of Ancient Houses is a complex thing. Each Head of House can change or simply maintain the methods by which the passing of such responsibility occurs." Vorgann's expression had gone grim, something that the young wizard had started noticing, spending more time with the Goblin.

Harry put away the scrolls he held, despite the nearly overwhelming draw of them. "I assume there will be some problem with the reading of the Will, as it stands then?"

Nodding, the Goblin gestured to the golden sheet before him. "The merger of House Potter and House Black cannot occur. Each are Ancient Houses, and due to this, certain safeties are in place to restrict one from taking on too much power, and usurping control of the wizarding world."

"How can being heir to both Houses cause such a thing? I understand money being powerful, but this —"

Tonks nodded, but tilted her head, recalling a thought. "The Wizengamot. Both Houses have a seat there don't they?"

"More than just a seat, Ms. Tonks," Vorgann replied, the small grin Harry had come to recognize as the herald to the solicitor's sense of mischief creeping up his lips, "Ancient Houses hold responsibility for

numerous seats, based on the providence of their holdings. Not simply a single seat, as no single person, it was decided in the same vein as the separation of Ancient Houses, can speak for so many, in an objective fashion."

"Seats," Tonks whispered, her eyes widening and turning on Harry. "How many?"

Rapping his knuckles upon the desk, Vorgann summoned another sheet, this one a red-lined and dark gray color. "House Potter's representation is five seats, all appointed by one Albus Dumbledore, acting Steward. House Black's representation is seven seats, appointed previous to Sirius's Black assumption of Head of House, by one Orion Black," he recited, the record vanishing from his hand afterward.

"Twelve... seats." Falling back into her seat limply, the Auror's eyes were wide with shock. "Harry, there are fifty-five seats in the Wizengamot."

"So you see why there are restrictions in place, disallowing the merger of Ancient Houses."

His eyes closed tightly, Harry ground out his words without inflection, "If I cannot be appointed Heir of House Black, then why would Sirius have set me as such?"

A broad smile spread along Vorgann's features. "I never said you couldn't be.

"Currently, we are charged with the insurance and dispensation of Sirius Black's Will. As it stands, you are Heir to the Potter House, but do not possess the full vesting of it yet. Unless you work to assume all powers and Estate from Albus Dumbledore, you shall not be, upon the reading."

Laughing, Harry leaned back, the harsh, barking sounds echoing about the room. "Oh, so you do me a service finally, Dumbledore! I see. So I can be made Heir Black, but because of how things are currently, I'd not be able to assume my family House?"

Grinning, the Goblin nodded. "As it stands."

"And were I to attempt the assumption of my House later?" Harry's smile was growing, and Tonks was noticing a slightly disturbing similarity to Vorgann's.

"Then, you would, as Head of House Black, need to make arrangements for the passing of that Title to another. One of your own choosing, of course."

"Of course," Harry purred, chuckling. "I second Tonk's sentiment earlier. Never Riddle with Goblins."

Shaking his head slowly, Vorgann's smile seemed to warm. "We'd welcome your mind, Harry. In fact... in confidence, Ragnok appointed me to work with you, specifically because of his interest in your future. So much is his attention on you, that he'll be officiating the Blooding and the Reading."

Stalling in her filing, the young Auror sat her paperwork on the table and blinked, "The Dvalinnsynir is interested in Harry? What has he done to warrant that attention?"

"It is who he is, and how he shapes it, and that potential he holds that the Dvalinnsynir finds intriguing," the Goblin replied, eyeing Harry's response to this surreptitiously. "He is a great wizard. As we have heard, and I myself have seen, treats all with respect. A canny Riddler, and not unfamiliar with strategy, as we have both seen. He will soon bear not only the most singular power in the Wizengamot, but also one of the largest fortunes in all Britain." A vicious smirk lit up the Goblin's face. "What is there not to pull one's attention, Ms. Tonks? And perhaps now you can see the answer to your own question, of 'Why?' from earlier, Harry."

Harry Potter, supposed savior of the wizarding world, summed up his view of the solicitor's statements in the most eloquent way he could manage. "Bloody hell."

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"Well that was... rather informative," Tonks said dryly, as the pair sat in a booth at the Leaky Cauldron, sipping drinks that both decided the hours under the earth had earned. She had gathered up the bulk of their ammunition, in the form of paperwork and files, and stowed it carefully under signed locking charm and Disillusionment. After the meeting with Vorgann, they had both paid the small fee for use of the Bank-run owlery, to mail off a number of letter that neither felt up to writing, after the exhaustive meeting.

Shaking his head slowly, Harry threw back the small tumbler of firewhisky, and waved the smoke from the narrow confines of his hood with a cough. Tonks had given him a look for ordering the stiff drink, but relented in view of all they'd learned that afternoon. "I thought that finding my birthplace would be nearly the last step. Getting emancipated, then out on my own, working and training at my own speed, since Dumbledore and the Order only seem to think that protecting me is enough.

"Now it turns out..." sighing, Harry took another drink, and coughed at the rough taste. "Now I have the Wizengamot, some mysterious Stewardship to remove somehow from the most powerful wizard of the age, the management of two Ancient Houses," resting his forehead on the table, Harry groaned.

Chuckling a bit, Tonks patted him on the back. "Welcome to being an adult, Harry."

Glaring up from under his hood, the young wizard blew the last puff of smoke in her direction, "Where's Peter Pan when you need him?"

Tonks seemed to look out over the taproom floor, swirling the last swallow of drink in her glass, "Probably frolicking and fighting and not noticing the young woman who's pining for him, that left it all behind just to be with him..." snapping out of her daze, she hid her blush behind the glass. "So the story goes."

Harry fixed her with an inscrutable look, and tossed back the last of his own drink. "Anything left to do in Diagon while we're here? And what do you think a Blooding is? I figure it's some kind of Ancient House Heir Hoodoo protocol or paperwork... Bah! Never mind. I'll show up early as Vorgann asked and we'll know when we know."

"Not unless you feel like firebombing the Prophet's offices, I have no suggestions on else to do, and as for the other," she shrugged and dug about in a pocket. "Not a clue," she quipped, leaving a few Sickles on the table as they stood.

Harry snickered, looking around the nearly empty room slowly. It seemed like a lifetime ago he'd stayed here, over part of a summer and just watched as people came and went. Lively people. Living people. Without the fear that the world would topple down around them without warning. Now the Cauldron, even Diagon proper, were nearly clear of wizards. Everyone was so taken with being afraid, looking over their shoulder and fleeing from deep shadow.

He understood the power Voldemort had then.

Wizards were used to feeling superior. He'd seen it his first year at Hogwarts, how they considered muggles inferior, beneath them. Saw it in Arthur's fascination with the Grangers, during second year – he'd nearly cuffed the man in the head for flailing about like a child at the zoo, as he pointed and whooped with glee at the simplest thing they did. As if they weren't the same as him!

Yet, show them something that had indiscriminately killed, and destroyed parts of their world, make them face the reality of their own darkest nature, and they crumbled. It wasn't fear of death that Voldemort truly used to instill terror and awe in those he stood against, it was fear of themselves. Fear that they were no better than muggles, when someone more powerful stood before them. Fear that their own natures were as dark and twisted as his.

People, Harry had found long ago, could not face that which they feared. Muggles rationalized it, denied and shrugged it off till it had stolen into their homes and stolen their lives in the night. Wizards were so cowardly in facing it, that they couldn't even say a name.

Harry, feeling the revulsion of his realization, tried to shake those impressions from his mind. "Lets go, Tonks. I'm feeling a bit ill,"

"Right, Harry." Reaching out, she tucked her arm in his and with a glance laced with worry, Apparated them back to the Murmur's Hall.

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"Albus, we have a problem," the abruptness of Moody's statement, as well as the lack of announcement from the fireplace convinced the Headmaster to overlook the broach of protocol. Besides, the ex-Auror was his most valuable ally, these hard days.

Dumbledore crossed the office to the hearth and nodded to Moody's image there. "Alastor, meet me in Grimmauld in half an hour, unless the news you have is so dire it cannot wait?" Moody nodded and agreed to his terms, clearing the fireplace.

The Headmaster paced about quickly, tapping his his glasses with the tip of his wand. "What purpose... what reason?" Shaking his head soundly, the aged wizard scoffed and returned to his desk, picking up a flask of milky liquid, the sheen pearlescent against the glass. Slipping the crystal container into his robe, Dumbledore sealed his offices with a powerful charm, and prepared to leave the school.

His Auror's training still well in place, Moody had his wand trained on the hearth before the soot had started swirling from the tell-tale flash that signified floo travel. Only when Dumbledore's blue eyes met his and he felt the cool weight of Legilimency did the Auror relax. "Evening, Albus."

"Good evening, Alastor." Dumbledore went about checking the wards with a flick of his wand, using the ancient house's own defenses as his own. The children slept, and the adults weren't interested in the least in the kitchens. "Let us have a drink, and discuss your concerns," he urged, turning to the hall and it's connecting door.

Settling themselves at the long table, crowding a room that normally never served people, only designed to allow room for servants, the two aged wizards summoned drinks. After a moment and a toast, Moody dispensed with the niceties and addressed his concerns, "Ginny's getting less stable, Albus. She's young yet, and her core's not resilient enough to stand the strain."

"We were aware of the risks, and the possibility of... permanent damage to the girl when we began this project, Alastor," Dumbledore replied, his tone broaching no arguments. "We work for a goal that is greater than one, two or two dozen students and adults. The fate of the entire wizarding world rests on our work. We cannot fail."

With a weary sigh, the ex-Auror rapped his cane once on the floor in annoyance, "Goals and focus are grand Albus, when you don't have to feed the girl poison every week, and watch her soul wither and die." Lips thinned to narrow line, the scarred man took a pull from his hip flask and shook his lank hair back. "Besides, who are you going to turn into the next beacon for the boy, if the young lass crumbles? Death of love is a hard thing to live beyond, Albus. He won't be so fast to focus on another."

His blue eyes cool, the Headmaster had to admit the wisdom of Moody's argument, even if the inspiration for it stemmed ultimately from weakness. "Very well. We shall reduce the Amortentia she receives. It matters little now, with Harry gone from us. We cannot insure his side of the equation as things stand." Nodding, the man regarded one of the most decorated Aurors in history, "Alastor, that was surely not all you summoned me for."

"Course not. It simply weighed heaviest on my mind. The real concern I had, was the news some tongue-wagging nobody in the Ministry was bandying about this evening.

"Seems he had the honor of seeing to a young Mr. Potter's business in Gringott's today." Moody sat back, watching the gears turn at his news. Albus's expression went from cool and unconcerned to surprise, to worry and frantic thought, before returning to his usual calm, airily cheerful demeanor within barely a score of seconds. Smirking slightly, the former Auror took a pull from his flask and

waited for the grandest manipulator of the age to come up with a plan for this.

Moody decided to keep the news that what appeared to be a slender young woman wearing an Auror's blue robes had been accompanying the youth, and that he seemed to be carting about in an Unspeakable's Gray. "The man hoped to speak with the boy again, as he was leaving, and apparently he was there for at least another hour, as the man's shift ended. Seems he was talking with someone for quite some time."

Albus schooled his panic and nudged at Moody's mind for whatever information and extrapolation he could from the information, but only received images of what had been described. "I see... yes. This does not bode well. If Harry moves to reclaim his House rights, I will of course be notified. The Will is sealed. And even if he were to convince the Goblins to assist him, the Geis won't allow them to breach our contact."

And without knowledge within the Vault, Harry could not reclaim his Birthright before he, Dumbledore, decided it time. One more carrot to lure the youth, shape him. Relaxing back into his chair, the Headmaster banished thoughts of Harry slipping from his grasp, but rejoiced in one simple truth. "Regardless of those worries, if this news is to be believed, then the boy is nearby. Active, and well. If he can go to Gringott's today, then in a few days time, we shall have all the time and opportunity we need, to bring him back to his place."

Nodding with Albus's conjecture and conclusion, Moody had to agree, even if some of the details weren't known to him. "Chosen One he maybe, but he isn't ready. Needs more time, before he's loosed on old Tom.

"Now, I still think you shouldn't be coddling him so." Grimacing, the old man shook his head slowly. "Boy needs more fight in him. For Merlin's sake, he has to fight Him. If we send him out as he is –"

Albus cut him off, with a severe wave of his hand, "Then we will not be repeating our sins, and using only the amount of force needed to conclude this war."

"Less a fighter than a poisoned lamb to the lion then, Dumbledore?" Snorting, Moody banged his cane on the floor. "I don't like it. But I like Voldemort less."

His lip raising slightly at the corner, Albus bowed his head slightly in the ex-Auror's direction. "As I well know." Rising, apparently finished with the meeting, the Headmaster strode from the room. Alastor followed slowly, trying to muffle his steps and not wake the Matron Black's portrait. When the two reached the sitting room and hearth, Albus paused and turned to the ex-Auror. "Remember the mistake we made, nearly fifty years ago, for the greater good. We made a weapon that when loosed, nearly killed us all.

"I will not leave the blade loosed like that time." Staring out at nothing a moment, the ancient man took a deep breath and smiled. "What we do, we must do in faith and for the good of all, not the few. We must achieve peace, even if it means the loss of those things beautiful and innocent." Shaking his head slowly, the man handed Alastor the pearl-limed flask and waited for the Auror to take it. "We, the old, remember that beauty and innocence are fleeting, but renewing. In too short a time, those things bend under time's unrelenting step and we find ourselves."

Alastor took the flask with a sick feeling deep in his heart. "As you say, Dumbledore."

The Headmaster turned and with a handful of floo powder, was about to cast it upon the embers, when Moody recalled one other bit of information. "Wait, I'd nearly forgotten, with our reminiscing. Curse of age.

"The Titles office, a few days ago was in a tizzy at something unheard of." Moody grinned and cast his own floo powder as Albus paused. He called out his residence and let the flames go green for a long moment, giving his face a sinister cast.

"Turns out an Unspeakable was rooting about in young Potter's records, and made off with all his birth forms." So saying, the man strode into the emerald flames and was gone with a swirl of soot.

Dumbledore stood, for the first instance in a long time, quite at a loss. For the youth to be parading about in the Gray was bold and foolish, if the actual Unspeakables were to catch him out at it. Unstated and old, the law was resolute in this – impersonating an Unspeakable was a banishable offense. Life in Azkaban, all one had to look forward to. Perhaps the youth were simply ignorant...

If he were not? If he'd gained the allegiance of the Unspeakables? Surely it was young Potter playing his games in the Ministry under a simple disguise, but if not?

Albus sighed heavily, shaking suppositions and suspicions from his mind. There was only this game, his board. Black and White, Dark and Light. Nowhere in this game, was there room for the Gray, and the preposterous notion that another player were there, maneuvering him. There were only mistakes, loose ends to be tied up. Things left undone, that returned at inopportune moments to complicate his further ambitions. Tom. Harry. Nymphadora.

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The two hooded and cloaked figures stumbled along the halls, laughing occasionally. Their success and the announcement of it had spread about the Hall, and by the time they'd crossed into the commons, gray cloaked figures had been clapping Harry on the back, and congratulating him on the news.

The young wizard and Tonks had been stunned for a small period, before giving in to the good will, and partaking of a late afternoon celebration. The trend they had unwillingly set at the Leaky Cauldron had followed them, and before Harry had realized it, he had gotten as drunk as he had been, after their his '94 cup win, during his third year.

While the Unspeakables weren't the revelers that Gryffindor fielded, they held their own. Not to be outdone, Harry and Tonks had come to an agreement, not to be wallflowers, and outdone by their drab hosts.

They also took up tankards of a deep brown, thick beer that both he and the young Auror drank down, as fast as it was handed to them.

And it seemed, the casks were bottomless. Tonks and Harry were witness to some fine bouts of singing, a booming kind of chant that occurred in a language Harry was unfamiliar with, but that left him feeling like he'd just read a rousing saga. Almost the entire commons had taken part, and it was a surprise to both of the rather tipsy wizards that their often companion and host, had also taken up the task.

Her voice didn't boom, so much as lilt and drift across the commons, and as they listened, something occurred to Harry. Not wanting to disturb the song by speaking, he tapped Tonks's arm, pointing at his ear and tapping it again. He was met by a quizzical look till he repeated the tap, and pointed at his ear a moment later.

Tonks got the idea, and focused on what she was hearing. A tap and —

Potter...

She heard it that time. The song, whatever the young woman was singing, involved Harry. Another tap and she roused herself from that initial curiosity long enough to catch another name.

...mphadora...

Blinking, she looked to Harry with mild shock, as he nodded. They listened to the woman's words and the cadence lulled them, almost a chant, almost a ballad. When she drew to a close the group's attention seemed to shift and the lot looked to them, forcing any thoughts of the slight hooded woman's song out of their minds.

Tonks looked around, and backed up a step. "Um. Oh no, you want... us to sing too?"

Calls and nods answered her, and Harry couldn't help his amusement, in no better place than his companion. "Well, c'mon Tonks! Lets have a round from you!"

"Oh you!" Glaring daggers, she got a canny smile and leered at the now wary Boy-Who-Lived. "Well. May as well. In for a Knut, Mr. Potter? Give you one chance to get out of doing a song on your own, and that's to join me in mine. Game?"

The tables suddenly turned, he looked about frantically and was dragged to the center of the circle, where each of their hosts had done their part. "Tonks, what are we going to sing? It's not like I was in choir at Hogwarts," he hissed hotly, feeling a rather large dose of anxiety wash over him.

Grinning, Tonks pulled her wand and summoned a rather curious violin, seemingly made half of silver, half of a pale wood. "Hope you're more than a pretty face, Mr. Potter. We'll do something simple, you listen to the muggle wireless sometimes yes?"

"When I can, Dudley tended to monopolize it often. What are you planning?" Feeling rather out of place, Harry watched with the same attention the other figures did, as Tonks briefly tuned the odd instrument.

Chuckling and winking at him, a glint in her eye, the Auror hummed a bar of a popular regional tune. Harry recognized it not from the Dursley's wireless, but Hermione. There were a few brief moments that the two had at King's Cross, waiting for their parents and guardians, and during one she'd pulled out a CD player.

He recognized the tune, a haunting little folk ballad and grinned, earning him one in turn from Tonks. "Ready then, Mr. Potter?"

With a nervous glance, he closed his eyes, as the woman beside him set her bow to string. A slow purr wept from the violin, and Harry felt his throat tighten. Tonks hummed and sang a scale, and in a moment he joined her, casting his lower voice to hers in a harmony. With a smile and a wink, she coaxed a smile from him and the lead began with it. Harry let his worry and hesitation go, letting his voice draw from his tree's gentle wind, a rhythm he was fast finding comfortable. Tonks slipped her fingers along the neck of her instrument, and with the catch of a note, lead him to song with her own sonorous voice.

Look within, and find your way
A path we can together bear
Laud, rejoice the dawning day
A light upon your beloved, fair

Laughing, cast your voice to song
To these young maidens dancing
Evening shadows growing long
To revel under bright moon, rising

Dance for those among you smiling
Lost in the rhythm of ages gone
A lass with darkened eyes beguiling
Lost to a kiss most deeply, drawn

Your joy and sadness upon it bloom
These boughs of gentle memory
Great ark of leaf and branches loom
These dreaming oaks, our history

So, wake the love within your eyes
Upon these hearts, know no past
Those dear will wing upon pale skies
Upon a bright star, your future cast

And, remember me, my beloved fair
Awaiting o'er fair hill, to be found
Your voice a whisper in my hair
Awaiting the hand a ribbon, bound

Tonks's violin stilled with a sigh, and the spell of song broken, Harry slumped. His arm wrapped around Tonks, and he leaned against the woman, his breath coming in short gasps. "Who knew singing could be so much... work?"

A gentle hand on his shoulder led him to a chair, and the young Auror sat beside it, a crooked smile on her face. "Well, Harry, not everyone puts so much magic into their voice as to bewitch the audience... look," and she pointed, with the bow of her violin, to the still rapt circle

of gray cloaks. Grinning, she gave him a light nudge and mouthed a prompt, for the dazed wizard.

"Oh... Finite Incantatum," he intoned, waving his wand briefly.

The circle of gray robed Unspeakables seemed to shiver and shift, the blank faces of their hoods all turning to the pair, sitting at the table with eerie synchronicity. Tonks's hand on his shoulder tightened slightly, and she leaned a bit closer, voice cast for his ear alone, "maybe we overdid it?"

Harry nodded almost imperceptibly, "yeah, I think so."

The pair stiffened as the young woman broke from the throng, and came to Harry's side, opposite Tonks. To their surprise, the cloaked Unspeakable bowed deeply, her hands clasped before her, "Thank you, Harry. Thank you, Ms. Tonks. It has been long since we had a revel with such a rich song. For us," the young woman gestured behind her, to her peers, "song, ballad and epic are history. It is how we speak our wisdom, how we pass on that knowledge.

"We have our library, but that is information." Again the woman bowed, this time dropping to her knee, to come to eye level with Harry, "Knowledge, is the tempering of that simple, crude information. One can learn from a book. But one cannot know from one," reaching out, she surprised the two, touching each of them upon the forehead, briefly. "You sing beautifully. We would be honored, if on the day of your leaving, we could share another song."

Tonks looked to Harry, as he gazed back to her briefly. Their eyes told one another well enough, that neither knew what the cloaked woman spoke of. "Day of our leaving? Is there a particular time we will be parting company?"

"Of course," the woman's hood bobbed slightly. "You have a task, a Riddle to solve. We understood this when you came to us, and offered you the Hall to study, and prepare.

"You can gain no more from this place. So it is time, for you to move on." Standing and seeming to gather herself, their host spread her

hands, the open hands and splayed fingers an unfamiliar gesture to the two wizards. "We knew you would leave, and you are.

"You shall be leaving, after Lúgnasad's feast, the day after Harry's birthday."

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The final few days after the revel and before Harry's birthday went quickly. He and Tonks slipped out under a heavy glamor she'd placed on the pair, to Madam Malkin's to get the young man some clothes that fit him better than rags. As an afterthought, the pair ventured out to muggle London and did some shopping there as well. Both Harry and Tonks had deep muggle tendencies, and the comfort of a pair of jeans and a simple pullover were guilty pleasures for them.

A new trunk to store his wardrobe in followed, but Harry kept from a great shopping spree, until the Reading at least. It wasn't a lack of Galleons that restrained him, but more a sense of need. Or the lack of it

He didn't need new things. Harry had spent almost his entire life, with the surety that any thing he owned, would be a castoff from someone. So the idea of new things, much less many new things, intimidated him somewhat. Oh, he took pleasure in them – but every time he wore a new shirt, or robe, he worried on pulling threads, ruining hems.

The day before the Reading, Tonks pulled him out into muggle London once more, and to Harry's embarrassment, they returned most of his new muggle clothes. Tonks wouldn't let him sulk over it, and assured him it wasn't a punishment, and after a short bus ride, she showed Harry the most amazing thing he'd ever seen.

An entire alleyway, nearly the length of Diagon, of thrift and secondhand stores. The pair ran each other ragged, trying on odd and mismatched clothes, laughing and causing a scene from one shop to another. Harry reveled in the 'new' old things, and Tonks found herself drifting more than once on the young wizard's laughter.

The end of the day found them both carrying more parcels than the other's previous combined.

Those clothes would be worn more often, than the others combined as well, both felt. Wizards just couldn't make proper boots, Tonks assured Harry, while he extolled the virtues of a properly broken in set of canvas trainers and sweater. For a change, his clothes, though worn, fit him. It was glorious.

It was a light time. Lacking the gravity and urgency their study, and the Will would have rested on them those few summer days. Back within the Hall, their often companion, the young woman was conspicuously absent, and none that they asked could or would tell them where she'd gone.

The most detailed explanation they received, was that she was recalled to complete her education, at a school that the Unspeakables refused to name.

Harry felt an unpleasant weight in his stomach, at the realization he'd never managed to get the girl to reveal her name. She always ducked or ran from the question, and to save her discomfort, he'd eventually stopped asking. Now, with her no longer there in her odd, but comfortable way, he felt her absence.

Weighted by that, and many other thoughts, Harry found sleep the night before the reading difficult if not impossible. "Why would she never tell us her name?" Tonks mumbled and he could tell he'd roused her from her sleeping. "Sorry."

"Wasn't asleep, Harry. Just lost in thought." She undermined her own words with a yawn. "I don't know. Maybe it's part of their way. None of the others gave us a name. Or perhaps she just didn't want to tell us. The Unspeakables are... different lot. Sometimes I wonder if we're all from the same place."

Harry nodded, still unconvinced. He knew, if he'd asked the right way, she would have told them. Other questions gnawed at him as well, and plucking one from its torment, he held it to light, "Tonks, do you think we're ready for this?"

She shifted upon her own bed, and Harry could faintly make out her silhouette in the darkened room. The young Auror had risen, and was now sitting and leaning back against her headboard. "I can't think of a way to be more so, that we could accomplish in the time we had." He could tell she meant this, and it comforted the young wizard more than a little. Still, doubts buzzed about in his mind, and he knew sleep was far off.

"I suppose so. But what are we doing now? Are we still working for the same thing, when we started?" His voice went thin, by the end of the question, and Tonks could practically feel the uncertainty washing over Harry.

Running a hand through her hair, she sighed and considered the question carefully, "When we started, not that we really planned it, when I started... my goal was to get you free of Dumbledore. To fulfill a wish Sirius had, that he could not." She looked to Harry, and could feel his eyes, the green fire of them so intense, burning at her from the dark shadow of the young man. "My goals have not changed, nor have my reasons.

"I want to help you, to be free. Whatever that means. Whether it's running off to the unnamed Isles, and setting up herding sheep, or bullheadedly forcing your way through the rest of your time at Hogwarts." Shaking her head slowly, Tonks sighed. "I've worked for the wrong side, but with the right intention, too long. It was long in waiting, for me to find the right way, the right goal."

Harry sat, stunned by the openness of Tonks's words. He'd known by their conversation, that she was growing dissatisfied with the Order and the Aurors, under the Ministry's corruption, but for her to go to those ends? "You'd be wasted herding sheep, Tonks. You've too much talent for such, far too much," he replied, quietly, but loud enough for her ears.

He could feel her smile, and hear it in her words, "Thank you, Harry. I have to say, that having such an appreciative companion on our little rebellion does help keep things pleasant."

Chuckling, Harry stretched, letting his back settle loudly. "Well, wait till I get a chance to cook, then I'll show you that I'm worth something, to balance it out somewhat."

"There you go again," she mumbled, and he could see Tonks shaking her head. "Selling yourself short. When are you going to learn, Harry? There is a reason people look to you, in whatever way they do. It's not because you're the Boy-Who-Lived, but because you're the Boy-Who-Endures."

"You keep on. You don't give up. You press on, odds be damned. Chance on your heel like a hound, and you just persevere," Sighing, the young Auror settled back under her coverlet, regarding Harry's shadow a moment. "It's part of what makes you Harry, part that never changes, no matter what you go through."

"I see. Ah, thank you..." he replied, unsure what else to say.

"What for?"

"Being honest with me," Harry said immediately. "For being here with me, and not just because I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

Yawning, Tonks murmured her happiness to be that friend. A thought, unpleasant, wormed its way to the front of her thoughts, and Tonks debated burying it yet again, but with the Reading tomorrow, she figured, this would likely be her last chance. "Harry, I need to tell you something, and I don't want you to lose focus on what I'm saying, alright?"

"Alright."

Sighing, she closed her eyes. "I don't want you to think of Dumbledore as an enemy. Hold on," she replied, seeing him prop himself up and out of bed. "Despite what he's done to you, he's still the one man who defeated Grindelwald. He's still the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and the most powerful and influential wizard alive, and each step he takes, only benefits the Light." Taking a breath, she knew that Harry was trying to reconcile her words and his own anger,

and hoped she wouldn't suffer the consequences of Dumbledore's betrayals.

Harry's lips were pulled about his teeth in a vicious grimace, hearing Tonks speak as she did, after knowing what the man had done to him. "I know, I do," she murmured, "that you don't want to hear that. Or anything similar.

"But you must come to realize... though your means are different, your goals are the same. It's rare that a man considers himself a villain. Often, he's doing good, if only in his own awareness. I'm sure Dumbledore sees himself as being right, or at least working for the Light."

He didn't want to listen, but he did regardless, mostly because the person who was speaking was Tonks. Anyone else he'd be screaming, railing at. The worst part of it, was she was right. He could tell Dumbledore really believed he was working for some greater good. For the right. Harry, unlike Albus, couldn't justify the things the man did, even with that envelope over him. It made him wonder what kind of man he really was, at heart.

"Don't worry Tonks. I know who my enemy is. If anything, Dumbledore is just an obstacle on the way. I won't let the wrongs he's done me, dictate my actions so that I lose focus on our ultimate goal.

"I must defeat Voldemort."

"We must defeat Voldemort," Tonks replied quietly, making Harry blink in surprise.

He considered the young woman, sleeping just across the room from him for many moments, before sleep threatened to still his mind for him. As he drifted, one thought begged to be loosed, and he did so with a quiet voice, "Thank you. Good night, Nymphadora."

Tonks had a troubled time getting to sleep that night. Most of it was thinking on the very things she was schooling Harry on. Not the least of her whirling thoughts, was the fact she didn't even react to Harry using her given name.

Regardless, she wasn't going to let him make a habit of it.

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A/N: I really dislike author notes. However, I felt this one needed.

Thank you everyone, who have said something positive, or who have given me feedback on this work. I'm vastly pleased with it, and if you've noted my update frequency, very pleased to write it. Your overwhelming, to my experience, response only strengthens my motivation.

The song... is mine. Please don't steal it. The tentative name is Oíche Lúgnasad and I wrote the lyrics and a small, simple score for it on violin while working on a few of the songs, that will be included with this work.

Chapter Six.

A rich man is either a scoundrel, or the heir of a scoundrel.

–Spanish Proverb

"Odd to think, we'll be leaving this place tomorrow," his hands stilled in trying his trainers, eyes moving to the other person sharing the room. Her hands were busy with packing, settling all the clothes and parcels into trunks, which she spelled after to the size of matchboxes. "Odd too that they knew we'd be leaving, before we did."

Peering about the room, she snatched up and packed a spare cloak, nodding absently, "I've stopped being surprised by them." Sitting on the bed, she ran a hand through her hair, a subdued, deep brown. "But she was right, our little gray liaison."

Harry regarded Tonks with a raised brow, running a hand along his jawline. A roughness there made him grin slightly. "Are we sure there's nothing more we can learn here? The library has much we've not even touched on."

Stowing a single book she'd kept out, Tonks nodded briefly, "Fairly sure. There were no other books on wandless magic, we've exhausted most of the resources on Estates and Houses." Grinning, she tossed Harry one of the dress robes they'd picked up earlier that week. "Only thing I can think of, is that bread you're so fond of."

"Be worth it, really." Laughing, he shrugged on the finery, the colors of Sirius's house. The robes were a fine, brushed black, that seemed to eat at the light, rather than reflect it. A hem and trim of silver, completed the effect. Beneath it, Harry wore his own colors, a rather comfortable burgundy pullover and a pair of simple slacks. Tonks thought he cut quite a figure.

She'd decided to follow her own suggestion to Harry, and rather than her Auror's colors for which by this point she was quite sure she wasn't any longer, she'd picked out a robe similar to Harry's, only not so fine. Tonks wore a simple gray dress, something cool for the summer weather under her robes, but accented it all with a few cuffs and her rather clunky muggle boots.

He ran an appraising eye over her, and grinned. "Nice boots," he dodged the blow she aimed for his arm, and held up his hands, warding off another. "But seriously, you think they've sacked you?"

"If not," she mused, staring up at the ceiling, as if seeking to look through those walls to her old life. "If not, then the letters I mailed off, before we ended up here, will see to it."

Pausing in retying his trainers, Harry considered her words slowly. "So you quit?"

Shaking her head, the young witch chuckled, "No, but I left the door and myself open for anything. I sent word, what kind and the nature of it I'd rather not discuss, to certain people." Taking a deep breath, she stood and regarded the room, with an air of finality. "All packed. Ready when you are."

"More Riddles, seems my world is built on them now," Harry grouched, his hands patting his robe free of wrinkles. He'd stowed the new wand, Sirius's gift into a small wrist holster that he'd picked up, one of the few splurging expenditures from the trip to Diagon. "Help me try something out, will you?"

"Sure thing, what's up," Tonks asked, settling by the door and watching as Harry went through a few preparations, things that reminded her of nothing so much as a young Alastor Moody.

Nodding at his work, Harry turned with a grin. "Try to summon my wands off me. Both of them," he amended, when Tonks readied her wand. Signaling his readiness, she cast a summoning spell, and deftly caught his Holly wand as it was pulled free of his robe. Brows rising, she focused again, and tried the same spell on Harry's other wand.

"How are you keeping me from summoning it?" She asked finally, dropping her wand and handing Harry his original one.

Adjusting the two straps that held the small leather device to his forearm, Harry grinned. "Summoning ward, done on the clasp that

holds the wand. Keyed to me alone. Same sort of thing they use in Gringott's to keep people from causing a mess, summoning off their, or other wizard's, vault contents."

"Nice, but won't it fade, from being cast on leather like that?" Tonks secured her own wand to a similar if unenchanted sheath, but thought better of it and gave Harry a wicked grin. "Accio Holster."

Harry yelped as the small leather device was yanked free of his arm, and flew to Tonk's outstretched hand. "Seems it still needs work," he muttered.

"Indeed. But better to know a weakness, than have an enemy silently exploit it," Tonks said sagely, earning her a mock salute from the young wizard. Learning his lesson, Harry cast a Disillusionment on the thing, once he'd settled it securely.

They had both agreed that the Reading would likely not be a target for his enemies to show themselves, but there were no guarantees. Preparing for the worst, while hoping for a simple and uneventful day, the two went about readying themselves. "I don't really feel like eating," Harry noted idly, to which Tonks disagreed.

"Best to eat something, light if it needs to be. Never know when you'll get to again," when the comment caused Harry to snort and double over in mirth, she fixed him with a glare, shifting her features. Harry snorted and kept rolling about on the floor, as a pink-haired, dress wearing Moody stomped about, crowing "Constant Vigilance!" at him.

When Harry had recovered himself, Tonks took on her previous appearance. Brunette hair, her same pale face, and dark eyes smiled at him, as the young wizard took his last look at the room that had been home for his most curious summer to date. "I'm going to miss this place."

"You're going to miss the bread," Tonks teased, and dashed down the hall ahead of the laughing Boy-Who-Lived. The pair slowed as they neared the commons, and Harry's thin hope of saying goodbye to the young woman that had been the such a great help to them, died as he could not see her among the robed figures. As they went

among them, clasping hands and receiving good wishes for their trip to the Reading, there were a number of murmurs of regret, that he and Tonks would be leaving so soon after the next evening's revelry. Tonks had spoken with him that morning, and they didn't mention to their hosts, that in truth they simply wouldn't be returning that afternoon at all.

A simple meal, eaten quickly and quietly after their hosts had gone about their own business, and the two had Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. They'd kept a pair of the gray cloaks, and had charmed them a darker shade, resembling the underside of an angry storm cloud.

Harry immediately went to Tom the barkeep, and slipped a pair of Galleons on his bar. "Privacy chamber, quickly."

"Yes sir, right this way," the bald man nodded, not bothering to look at Harry or try to look beneath his hood. He nodded to Tonks who'd kept to the doorway, scanning the room and watching for anything suspicious. Stepping forward briskly, the two cloaked figures passed behind one of the common walls and down the small hall, which opened up into the privacy lounges.

Three doors were open, and Tom lead them the the first on the left. "If you need somewhat, write it on the chalkboard. Someone will knock thrice and leave it in the cubby by the door. You can turn that," at which Tom pointed to a small, Lazy Susan type device, half in and out of the wall. "Will rotate whatever's on the outside, in.

"If there's nothing else? Good day then," dismissing himself, the toothless man shambled back down the hall, as Harry strode inside and Tonks scanned the hall. Seeing nothing, she pulled the door shut behind her, and the two shucked off the cloaks.

Shaking his head, Harry settled onto one of the small couches. "All this, just for a day on the town."

"Hey, better than the alternative," his companion quipped, pulling out an ear of bread and munching on it happily. Harry followed her example, taking out a few slices of his own to settle his stomach.

"You could be walking there, ignorant of what was going on, in company of Dumbledore and his lot."

Harry shot her a severe look, "Some of those 'lot' are still our friends."

"I know, Harry," looking older than he'd remembered seeing her, Tonks looked out the window, enchanted to be single-way, and sighed. "Just remember, Harry. It's either your freedom, or Dumbledore's will. I know I'd asked you not to consider him an enemy, but when he sees you next, we have to be ready."

"And I know him, Harry. He's not above using them, to get to you." Turning back to the young wizard, she shrugged. "Just keep your guard up, your wand close, and your head down today."

Grudgingly, he relented and nodded once. "I just hope this goes smoothly."

Smirking, her lips curling up slightly the young witch laughed. "Oh Harry, don't you remember who sat this all up? Of course it's not going to go smoothly."

Mumbling his answer, Harry let his head fall against his palm. "I just hope the Old Dog gets it out of his system,"

At 3 pm, the Reading would begin. Harry planned to arrive one and a half hours early, to perform some business of his own, mainly in ensuring whatever madness Padfoot had put in place, occurred. He'd been warned that at least three forces would stand against him.

Dumbledore, would likely try to use the event to reassert his hold on Harry. Threats to his friends, the members of the Order, himself, Tonks and even his attending of Hogwarts were all things he'd prepared himself for. He wanted to hope that the old man wouldn't go to such means, but as Moody had tried to instill in him, better to be prepared, than outmaneuvered.

The Ministry, thanks to Fudge and his weakening power, were likely to use this in their own way. Likely, in contest to the Will itself, as Sirius was still considered an escaped convict, and the legality of his

Will in question. Due to the research they'd completed, any legal issues they could predict were prepared for. The unknown still concerned Harry, but two had prepared for all angles that they could.

Voldemort... Harry expected some press from his camp as well. Surely, with the Malfoy's and Lestrage's as surviving blood relation, some contest would be made. He'd discounted any resistance from Bellatrix and her married family, as both Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrage were currently in custody, and it would be madness for Bellatrix herself to show up at a public location. The Malfoy's, on the other hand, were sure to cause some issue. Though Draco was at best a thin-blooded relation, he still remained a viable inheritor, if Harry were discounted.

This would leave all of the House of Black, and it's materials and moneys, in the hands of the Dark Lord. Lucius would likely be unable to field a solicitor, but Harry felt his wife or son would, without a doubt.

Laughing suddenly, Harry swung his feet out and lay back along the sitting couch. Tonks looked over at him with a brow raised, as he continued to writhe in his amusement. "Yes, Harry. The ceiling is rather comical, but I don't think it quite warrants such a fit."

"Oh, just thinking, Tonks. You realize, that if things go as planned, I'll be making irreversible steps against Dumbledore, Voldemort and the Ministry? The three most powerful forces in Britain." His hands moved up to rub against his eyes, glasses sliding up to the nest of his hair. "Am I mad? I must be."

"As a Hatter, young Mr. Potter," the pretty witch, stated, leaning over him, looking for all the world like a crazed hag. "And we shall soon be late, so lets get going!" Harry yelped and jumped, scooting away as she burst out into gales of laughter.

Hand over his heart from he scare, Harry rounded to find her doubled over on the lounge, clutching at her sides from laughter. The young wizard responded with a tickling hex, turning the laughing woman into a disheveled heap on the floor. "Git," he mumbled, sheathing his wand.

Fifteen minutes later, the pair left the Cauldron, preparations made, and nerves steeled. The plan was simple, for the first portion at least.

Walk up to Gringott's.

Harry had the rest down to possible situations. No plan survived first contact, he had read once. Experience reinforced this adage, and he took it to heart.

Diagon was busier than usual, to the casual eye. Harry noticed something odd, but kept his eyes and steps forward. He and Tonks kept the the center of the walk, unlike their last trip. Walking as if it were simple business, they'd decided was best, as anyone today skulking about would likely attract the attention of at least one of their enemies. He was immediately proven correct on this, when a startled child slammed into one of the small conversing groups, and the man's underlying blue robe was revealed. "Aurors," he hissed toward Tonks, as their pace neared the bank.

Upon the steps everything nearly went to pieces.

Striding almost alongside them, as the pair made their way, was Albus Dumbledore. Apparently Harry's plan to move early and get as much accomplished as possible was a common ideal. He was curious what the Headmaster's business was, and who with, but kept such thoughts to back of his mind. If he took a misstep and met the man's eyes, all would be for nothing. Stealing a hand to his robe pocket, he wrapped the silvery chain of the blackstone amulet about his fingers, hoping the contact to be enough.

Tonks slowed, and turned a slight glance to the white haired man striding near them. As she looked back ahead, she noticed that Harry seemed to take no notice of the man. Trying not to panic, she knew that would prove problematic, as almost no one ignored the Headmaster. She watched his brows knit, and his pace slow as he seemed to consider Harry's back. Tonks knew she had to do something, but it was her clumsiness that saved them.

Tripping on her own robe, she half turned and landed, elbow square in between Harry's shoulders. He fell without a sound, and the sound

of his nose striking the stone set her teeth. Gathering him up, she hurried him to the nearest Goblin, narrowly avoiding the aged wizards offer of assistance.

Banking on Dumbledore to be more intent on his task than some injured wizard, she approached a guard, flanking the door, "We must speak with Vorgann," she whispered to the guard, and was met with a stern glare.

The large Goblin looked rather unwilling to do anything for the young witch, but she motioned him forward and, leaning close spoke to him hurriedly. "I will relay the message. It will be up to Vorgann to answer it." So saying, armed guard turned and spoke briefly to the stone wall, which seemed to ripple at his words. A moment later, a familiar voice replied, in Gobbledegook.

She was worried that Albus or some other problem would occur, but was relieved when the familiar swarthy face of Vorgann appeared from the entrance. "Ah, I see my Riddle-master has taken a brisk walk into a wall." Amusement clear in his voice, he none the less motioned a pair of other Goblin's forward, taking up Harry and led the pair inside hurriedly. "I really must insist, that the next time you visit, we do so under more calm circumstances."

They were lead to a small room, just outside the main floor, and Harry was laid out on a couch. "Now, care to tell me why my client is currently unconscious, on the day of his inheritance?"

"Dumbledore was on the steps, and I needed a way to distract him," she mumbled, moving Harry's hood back and wincing. It was worse than last time. "Do you have any healing potions? I'm alright with simple things, but this will need a bit more than I can manage."

Casting the charm to repair his glasses, and remove the small shards of glass from his cheeks, she dabbed at the young man's face with a small towel. "Bloody klutz, I should keep my distance, from here out. Going to get us both killed I am."

Vorgann had seen Harry's injuries, and like the Guard, simply spoke to the wall briefly. Shortly Griphook entered, and handed the frantic

witch a small vial of healing draught. "Thank you," she mumbled, and quickly tipped the potion down Harry's throat.

A few cleaning and healing spells later, he looked whole and proper again. "Oh, lets hope he doesn't remember me falling," she fretted, but cast the waking charm despite it. "Rennervate."

Harry gasped and flailed about a moment, wand snapping into his hand silently and without notice. "What?" Looking from Tonks, to Vorgann and Griphook, he settled back on the couch, but kept his wand at the ready. "What happened?"

Biting her lips, Tonks sighed and hung her head, answering, "I tripped on my cloak and got your face mashed into the steps, " she mumbled, looking everywhere but at Harry. "I was worrying about Dumbledore, and how you seemed to have noticed, but ignored him –"

"Didn't want to draw notice," He mumbled, feeling at his tender nose lightly and wincing. "Always the nose..."

"Well, Dumbledore isn't one of those people you just walk past, Harry," she explained, shaking her head slowly in the dim room's light. Harry took in the furnishings and the Goblins and figured he was in the bank, but not sure where. Tonks spoke again, and he took the glasses she held to him. "No matter, he didn't notice us."

Nodding, he quieted her anxiety with a small smile. "What time is it?"

"You have an hour, before the Reading, Harry," Vorgann answered him, stepping forward quietly. Harry noticed he also had on more formal dress, a jacket or vest of what appeared to be woven metal, used as thread. That it remained a dull gray, like a foggy tweed amused the wizard. What surprised Harry about his dress was the large, wicked looking pick-hammer on his hip. Vorgann noticed his gaze and grinned his sharp-toothed best. "Dress occasion, Harry. We will be attending the Dvalinnsynir. Much like meeting your Queen, it is a protocol filled occasion."

"Protocol... right," remembering his first meeting with Vorgann, Harry winced. "I can't even greet him properly," he mumbled, looking to his

hand with a frown. Standing, Harry paced, realizing this was one thing he'd failed to plan for, in any way. As Harry seemed intent on stomping a rut in the room's floor, Tonks took a moment to speak with the familiar Goblin, about the Reading itself.

What she learned, didn't sit well. Her aunt Narcissa was present, as well as Draco. With them, was a solicitor, one who's name she recalled from a few whispered conversations, regarding Lucius and his Dark Artifacts obsession. They also brought with them a second solicitor, something she worried on. Dumbledore had of course come alone, but some members of the Order were in attendance. Lupin of course was there, and she fretted a moment.

Just before her rather rushed rescue of Harry, the two of them had taken to talking, rather often. He was harried, worked nearly to fatigue by the effort to gather intelligence and make headway with all the various packs and clans of Werewolves in the area. Sadly, there were precious few other options, and as the single Werewolf in the Order, it fell to him. She sympathized, as Order guard duty sometimes made her life less than pleasant, with patrols and desk work following a long night.

He could have used some help, but with the Ministry's increasingly xenophobic tendencies, little could be had. No Ministry official or worker now, could be anything but pure human. Any 'taint' or irregularity, got you sacked. Obviously, few of the Lycanthrope community held much regard for those siding themselves, even remotely, to the Ministry. It was a sad state, that even though the Order stood for the Light, they didn't stand with anyone who could help the Werewolves. And in that, they were destined it seemed, to fail.

With all the madness in purging anything inhuman from the Ministry, it was a wonder she still held her job, at the end.

Lupin sounded as worn and tired as she'd remember him. Her heart went to the man, a long time friend of her family, via Sirius to her mother, whom was his favorite cousin. Remembering her promises to Harry, she swallowed her heart and steeled herself, prepared if necessary to confront the man.

She hoped, desperately, not to need to.

Also in attendance was what sounded like the heads of the Weasley clan, who came without a representative, a solicitor for the Grangers who weren't present. Most annoyingly, the Ministry had also sent their own, in Dolores Umbridge. Tonks knew, without a doubt, that the woman and Harry were not going to be dealing civilly with each other at all.

To her relief though, Umbridge seemed to be perplexed by one other presence, that Tonks was quietly grateful for. She hoped that somehow, that meant something positive.

Most of the parties were milling about, in the Order's case, in the main floor lobby, or in the case of some of the Ministry or represented parties, in similar rooms to this one.

Vorgann had informed Tonks of the others present, and was currently watching Harry attempt to wear a rut in the visiting room floor. A smile and mischievous thought occurred to the stately Goblin, and gathering up his recent friends, pulled them aside. "As for protocol, Harry... let me make a few suggestions..."

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At half an hour till the Reading, a red-hooded Goblin entered their room, and stepped directly for Harry. "Heir Potter, the Dvalinnsynir had informed us that prior to the reading of the Will of one, Sirius Black, one final task was to be done, under the order of the Head of House Black."

Harry blinked in confusion, but stood and nodded to the Goblin. "Ah, will I be returning to this room, or directly to the Reading?" he asked quickly, nearly forgetting what Vorgann had just finished outlining. The red hood simply shook, indicating to Harry he'd be on his own, soon.

Turning, he went to Tonks and gave her a bracing hug, taking comfort in her as well. "Be strong. Nothing can happen to you here, if someone acts, do as we've said," the whispered exchange ended with a nod, and giving her a wide, mischief-filled grin, he turned then to their Solicitor.

"Take these, should be enough. And no worries on repayment – my stamp on them will do that," chuckling, the Goblin passed Harry five Galleons, which he pocketed quickly.

"Thank you, I hope to put a good foot forward here," the young wizard said, turning to follow the fast retreating red robed Goblin that had summoned him.

Laughing openly, the Goblin clasped Tonks on the back, and the two moved toward the large room that had been set aside for the reading. "Oh, young man, you've already done that, and in quite a short time. Ah, such an auspicious day! To think, Ms. Tonks," grinning, he gestured at the great doors before them, and the flanking, armed guards. Unlike the main doors, and any other portal in the bank, these Goblins were heavily armored in gleaming metal, and armed with things that seemed not only capable of rendering a man quite dead, but quite a few unsightly pieces as well. "Behind these doors, a world waits to turn."

More nervous and wary than she'd possibly been before, the young witch strode in behind the Goblin, with the assistance of Griphook, found a seat next to a snippy looking Molly Weasley, across the table from Vorgann. Two seats remained empty, at the tables head. One of them, a rather shocking collection of what could only be described as bone and gold, melding in one large, ornate throne. Not knowing whether it was a good or bad thing, she also noted that the bones at least, weren't human.

"What are you doing here," the Weasley Matron asked, with some venom in her voice. Rolling her eyes, Tonks had hoped, like Harry, to deal with the day, her grief and her business in peace. Apparently, the gods of red-headed women didn't believe in the peace of mind of others.

Looking to the woman with her best blank stare, Tonks let loose a long suffering sigh and simply drawled the word, "Will," with barely an inflection.

Turning her attention back to Vorgann's vulpine smile, she let the woman draw her own conclusions, from that point on.

Sirius was spot-on with his opinion of the witch, Tonks decided. Loud mouthed, busybody, indeed.

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As the rather rapid pace of the Goblin ended, Harry found himself in a small, circular chamber with a single, chairless table. The path had been short, but the hallways, he'd found, moved more than they did.

When next he heard someone tell him that a race were 'cunningly skilled' with something, he'd believe it. The simple room didn't really draw attention, but what held Harry riveted, was the table that seemed to grow from the center of the room.

"Please move forward," the hooded Goblin said, and Harry winced, dashing up. He'd been gawking from the doorway for at least a minute. The doors, heavy stone as it seemed everything here was, closed behind him. When they sealed, the seam literally fading, Harry swallowed audibly. "We will now perform the Bleeding, as per the stated desire of the Head of House Black."

"Excuse me, but what is 'the Bleeding', that you're talking about?" unable to properly dispel his anxiety, Harry fidgeted at his sleeve, and the wand beneath. Gesturing, the Goblin urged him forward, to the table.

Stepping forward, Harry's eyes widened when he saw what the table bore. Now, it's shape made sense. It rose from the floor, and narrowed sharply, ending with a stem or brace that seemed as thick as his leg. From waist height, it bowed out again, and the top was a

comfortable height for his elbows to rest. When he'd mused that it looked like a chalice, he'd been more accurate than he thought.

Within the bowl, writhed what resembled nothing less than a red-hued Pensieve. "I still don't understand, what's going on?" His voice rising slightly, Harry was beginning to feel the familiar energy that signaled his magic rising. Almost immediately, he slammed what small defenses his Occlumency had given him in place and took a stilling breath.

An impatient sigh issued from the red-hooded Goblin. "Head of House Black took great pains, to ensure his Will to be carried out. Many people would benefit from the House Black being in their control. Vast wealth, lands, political power," unconcerned, the Goblin strode up to and stood beside the red-hazed bowl. "To remove all contest to his request, we must make you a Blooded Heir."

Harry, nervous still and biting his lip, moved forward and peered within the table's contents. Again, the similarity to a Pensieve struck him, as the crimson water within seemed restless and active. The haze, though, stank of blood, and the smell cloyed in his nose and nearly had him gagging. "What am I to do then?"

"First, I must... impress on you the gravity of this." So saying, the Goblin removed his hands from his sleeves, resting the clawed fingers along the lip of the table. "The House of Black isn't a simple deed and Title. Ancient, they are, beyond thought. Do you know the origin of the name, Heir Potter?"

Shaking his head, Harry sighed and walked to the wall, leaning on it. He needed clean air, and it felt like there was precious little and less by the moment to be had in the room.

The Goblin nodded, and looked into the bowl, its voice cast low, "Of the first families, was Black. They ruled, among men, not just wizards, long before there were chiefs and then lords and kings. They brought with their blood, knowledge to each land and family that they took under their own banner.

"Black was the art they worked, as black was the iron they cast." With a start, Harry realized the clue Sirius himself had given him, with his wand.

Looking up sharply, Harry's mouth worked silently for many moments, before he seemed to nod, in acceptance. "Blacksmiths. The Black bloodline carried the knowledge of smithing, didn't it?"

Nodding, the Goblin continued, as if reading the words from a parchment, "Skilled with metal and it's forging, the long ancient blood brought with it magic. Magic from before men bore animal skins and danced the rains from the skies. Magic from before the forests took back the fair folk, keeping them safe in sídhe.

"Men grew, and magic, the magic they took and that was born into them, grew as well." Waving at Harry, the Goblin sniffed, as if in derision. "Wands and artifice. Before such, there was a deep magic. Words are lost to you, as a human, that describe what this magic once was. It at once, chose rulers, and was the object of wars. Blood was spilled to claim it, and children born to contain and further it."

He tried to make sense of the Goblin's words, but little seemed to do so. Harry understood blacksmiths, and how in ancient times, metalworkers were revered. How that knowledge, and it's progress was the fuel for war and industry. Magic as the red-hooded Goblin had described it, seemed like a thing of myth. The closest Harry could come, was some barely understood idea of Heavenly Mandate, from a class in his muggle school, what felt like ages ago. "I truly don't understand, what am I to be... inheriting?"

"Only you will know." Dismissing the conversation, the Goblin gestured Harry forward. "Time grows short. We must do this, now. Step forward."

Harry took a tentative step, but stopped an arm's length from the pool. "What... what shall I do?"

"Look deep, and understand," the Goblin said, as if fighting for the last word.

Nodding and taking a quick breath, Harry closed the distance, and careful not to breath, leaned forward, as if viewing a Pensieve.

The haze didn't condense on his glasses, as he'd feared, so he relaxed somewhat. He'd worried that after this, he'd resemble a vampire striding in to hear the Will. He smiled for a moment, till a sharp pull behind his chest struck him.

Again, and his eyes closed, pain wracking him. His arms lost strength, and realizing his precarious position, he tried to lean to the side, but he was too close, the table too wide.

Harry, feeling for all the world as if his heart were trying to burst from his chest, fell into the great bloody basin, and without a ripple, was gone.

"The Bleeding has begun," the red hooded Goblin intoned quietly, as he patiently stood some small distance from the table.

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Harry was... lost.

Empty, were he to have thoughts, would have been a proper word.

Something about how he was, itched. Itched was the best he could describe it. Mild annoyance, that he was wanting to fix, but not quite pain.

His eyes opened, and he looked up upon the ceiling of a room within Grimmauld Place. This particular ceiling, held a photo of a rather scantily clad woman riding a motorcycle. He felt a smile curve his lips, and stretched. Harry began to notice some things that were wrong. How he was, was wrong. He felt wrong.

Despite that feeling, he also felt refreshed and well rested and ready for breakfast.

The thing that Harry was riding, for he couldn't understand it as else at this point, stood and clothed itself. It ran a pale, gaunt hand through its hair, and swept it all back and from its face. Turning to the bedroom door, the thing paused, and in a way Harry could not describe, felt at the house.

It was like his own magic, but not.

Inside him, a great tree swept out, its branches curved and twined and running along him, as if it grew inside a Harry-shaped space. He was full up of it, but it felt like it was full up of him as well. The things that made him Harry, were spaced, twisted around and supported the tree of his magic.

This feeling... was like reaching out and touching another tree.

He concentrated, and it was easier. He understood then – that itch, was this feeling. It was like a door, kept shut. He pushed out of a memory, and into the feeling.

Harry pushed against it, and suddenly, Grimmauld swept against him.

It felt like he'd swallowed the mansion.

If he had the space in him to scream, he would have. As it was, his eyes, his head and his arms were all wooden, sighing with age and magic. He blinked, and windows, long shut creaked in their frames. Small things, long since infused with magic and taking a life of their own, scurried and hurried about the dark places inside him. As he learned to breathe again, he became aware of other things, inside him.

Ancient, tired and bent by time and master, Kreacher set about his tasks. He could feel the ancient elf's thoughts, how broken and confused. Ages upon ages of being pulled and pushed and set low by a master, such was his history. His Law. He was, servant. But now, all those that could call themselves his master, save one, were dead. And that master had no use for him.

Kreacher, was broken. He was bound by this feeling, inside Harry. He was made, filled up by the things that were running through Ancient Grimauld like nerves. Harry, curious, inspected himself, inside the Ancient place. Those pathways connected everything that was him. It ran around, branching, breaking and rejoining in odd ways, permeating, penetrating everything inside the house, that wasn't foreign. Even those, it worked on subtly.

He felt like it was like watching sap run through a tree, but it wasn't so. No, this was blood of a different sort. It held in it, an wicked power. It shaped, rather than was shaped by those within. To Harry, it felt like he'd been turned inside out when realizing this. All this awareness, all this knowledge, lead back to one person, dwelling inside the mansion.

As Harry probed further, understanding the feel of it, the way of it, his mind took in the totality of Grimauld, his brain made of vast empty rooms, old dust, and forgotten intrigue. Ancient artifice of things, and the artifice of behavior became the air he was breathing. Outside, those gossamer threads, fine like spidersilk, lead out and off and away. Into the ground, they all lead, and traveled, thickened and bunched into knots.

He picked one, and grasped onto it tightly.

Gasping, he was faintly aware of the vastness of a round room, with many people present. His gasp though, wasn't his. Thoughts of a flaxen-haired young man fled before terrified imaginings, and were replaced by a gaunt, haunted visage. A voice female and high, a voice he recognized and was shocked to hear, whispered a word in curiosity and fear.

"Sirius?" Narcissa spoke, with wide eyed fear. The knowledge and power that her blood bore was explored, touched in ways that made her feel like white-hot needles bore into her mind, ripped free, leaving her feeling weak and empty.

Harry fled from that part of the pattern, that part of himself unbelievably, and turned once more from the feeling he held, to what he knew to be memory. Memory born by the Blood and House of Black.

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For fifteen minutes, the room stood silent, the red haze drifting, wafting and curling back on itself slowly. Then, quite violently and suddenly, the pool drained with a sound like water rushing between huge stones.

Harry stood, slowly breathing and bracing himself on the lip, within the bowl of the thing. Taking a great gasping lungful of air, he threw his head back and wept.

Indelibly printed into his mind, worked there now like the tree, his magic, within him, was written the Ancient record of those people that would one day call themselves, Black. Everything Sirius had been, seen, done – he understood it. He was it. The Blood of Black held in it, the origins and the mold, for all the things that made and shaped his Godfather's family. Breaking that pattern, Sirius had closed himself to the contact, the awareness of all those things, that were ruled by that simple ideal.

Black.

It wasn't even blood that set that rule. It followed it, true – or else this ritual Harry had done was meaningless. What it was, was... elemental. It defied words, as the Goblin had said. He struggled with it, as it nearly overwhelmed him again, in trying to understand it.

His thoughts were woven into stone, that covered and cracked and rose up as trees and bloomed and took panicked flight as birds that dove down to run upon fleet hooves and sharp teeth that tore and ate the rocks and lichen between grasping roots that burrowed under pounding sea and great swell of cloud breaking apart in the first rays of light that reflected up from ancient stones under pools... Shaking his head he screamed, silently, as his mind tried to swallow the heritage Sirius had denied, or perhaps simply not eaten like a starving man. No, Sirius had known about this, but only sparingly

sought it out. He was taught by his family, to shape and be wary, and to be careful.

Like young wizards, now. Taught words, and motions of wand, when before, will and power had shaped their magic. Harry, ignorant of the Laws that make up Ancient Houses, had swallowed it all. It had broken him, and from the bloody earth, he had arisen again, made not of that which he had been, but written from that Law. It awoke in him, and without knowledge, he had taken it all in, and bound the instinct, the magic that pulsed like blood in an ancient rhythm, to his own heart.

A small sound, the clearing of a gravelly throat centered Harry back in his own skull.

"The Blooding is complete. Heir Potter, do you know your name?"

"Harry James Potter," he recited mechanically, and it took him some moments to recognize his own voice. So many voices, echoing in his mind. He could hear them all, speaking their own name, feel them in his own throat. Everyone Black, all that bloodline were in his mind, a thread and web of silver instinct. Narcissa, Andromeda, Draco, Nymphadora. Faintly even, he could feel Arthur Weasley, and even fainter still his children. The weave went on and on, and he could see, distantly the bright points of those thin of blood, weak of Law. He knew Bellatrix, her twisted mind and what shook him again out of his own concept of self, was that he understood her. An in that understanding, that knowledge deeper than words, he felt her to be natural, to him. Like she were a hand, or foot or crook of elbow upon his person.

The Goblin's voice reverberated into his mind, and Harry shook off his nausea and vertigo. "State your parentage."

"Jam... " Closing his eyes tightly, Harry took a deep breath. "James Potter, and Lily Evans." Faint voices spoke other names, thousands of names. He felt like a book of names, of things that were bound and tied to that flow of magic, named Black.

Slowly, the small Goblin took a step around the table and looked up at Harry, into his eyes. "Often, in ancient times, the Bloodying drove those without the knowledge of it's consequences mad. Irrevocably so. Small Houses required only a stained blade to pass the depth of their heritage to one not born to it. You are doing well, Heir Potter. Not many can hold so much, so young, so quickly.

"To rule a House, is to know Blood, bond and Law. Do you understand this idea?"

"I do," nodding slowly, Harry closed his eyes and willed darkness into his mind. Willed the thousands upon thousands of images and thoughts beyond that darkness.

Walking to a seemingly random wall, the red hooded Goblin ran a clawed finger along it, and doors carved themselves, broke free and swung open silently from the stone. "The Ritual is complete. Ragnok the Dvalinnsynir, awaits your presence for the Reading. Come with me, please."

Stumbling after with what felt like all of London packed into his skull, Harry made an unsteady way to the Reading, and the leader of the Goblin nation. He hoped, by the time he arrived, to not look so much like a drunken fool.

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His guide left him before the doors, and Harry boggled slightly at the massively armed guards. He wondered a moment why they were at a simple Will reading, when he recalled the other person, Goblin, to be present there as well. "Royal Guard?" He queried one, walking up close enough to make the armed Goblin shift menacingly.

A terse nod, and he smiled in response. "Ah, brilliant. Good work, men. Goblins. As you were," he bumbled, and taking a sobering breath, pressed forward on the centerline of the massive, gilded doors. Swinging silently open, they presented a sight that he already knew, but took in anew regardless. A great table centered the room,

not round so much as oblong. At the near side, closest the door sat the familiar, unpleasant face of Dolores Umbridge, who sat boggling at him with her great frog-like eyes. He walked forward, the Undersecretary's presence coloring his reaction to most of the room darkly. On either side of her, were the Malfoys, and Amelia Bones, who seemed to be ignoring the great toadish woman entirely. Harry stifled a smirk as the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement smiled very slightly in his direction. The Headmaster, who seemed unconcerned that the woman who had usurped his position at Hogwarts and who had nearly single-handedly ousted him from a place of influence, to fall down into Azkaban, was sitting not one place away. Across from Dumbledore, and looking paler than usual, was Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin refused to meet Harry's eyes, and to his confusion, seemed rather reserved as well. Whenever he did look up, it was either to his mother, who also looked somewhat uncomfortable, or to his hands, resting on the table.

Breaking free of his observations, Harry glanced about the room, and found it quite ornate. The walls were carved in deep relief, all the stonework moving much like the pictures in Hogwarts. Wars raged, and scenes depicting great finds under the earth played out, in silent violence and wonder. A warlord cleaved down hordes of Goblins and wizards alike on one panel of stone, reaching up and out to shake his great hammer to the skies in defiance.

The further portion of the table was more friendly, to Harry's eyes. Along the middle line, sat a man he didn't know or recognize, which he assumed to mean he was a solicitor for someone. There also sat Lupin, who was smiling sadly at Harry, his eyes rimmed and dark. The last Marauder looked like he was being hunted, rather than attending a Reading. His head full of old memories, Harry strode up to the tired looking Professor and threw his arms about his shoulders, pulling him into a hug.

"Old wolf, you look too weary for this," he said, voice going gravelly a moment with another man's worry, eclipsing his own.

Lupin stiffened in the young wizard's arms, hearing Sirius in his words. Swallowing, the Werewolf reached up and patted his best mate's son on the back. "I am, Harry. I am," pulling back, he searched out

Harry's eyes, and saw the brilliant green of them clouded and confused. "How are you though? What state are you in, Cub?"

Barking a quiet laugh, he shook his head. "I feel like I swallowed a house," laughing once more, the quiet way he would normally, the young wizard drew free, clasping the tired looking Werewolf on the shoulder. "Seek me out, after this. We need to catch up, Professor"

Nodding, Remus fell back into his seat, his senses boggling at what they were being told.

Harry smelled like himself, yet he was doing things that smacked of Sirius.

Near the far end of the table were the Weasleys, Arthur and Molly, sitting beside Tonks, who had a very blank look about her. Across from them, sat Lupin and the unnamed man, and his Solicitor, Vorgann.

At the head of the grand table, sat the biggest Goblin Harry had ever seen, and he sat upon a throne carved of gold and the bones of his enemies.

His swarthy skin was scarred, almost as much as Moody's. All over what skin Harry could see, were golden and silvery chains, crossing and banding his arms and neck and hands. The massive Goblin seemed to be wearing a small vault, as if it had been hammered into clothing, buckles, shoes and robe.

The robe Ragnok, for he could be no other, seemed woven of every metal known, in a tapestry print depicting a great forge and vault. One atop the other, both feeding each other, the flow of golden thread and knots moved. Gold dripped down into the flames, and was remade into wonders and coin, passing back up by hand of stone and Goblin, to the vault. Harry looked, as he had with Vorgann, to the Dvalinn's hip, and there as he expected, a massive war hammer, one face a great gouging pick, rested. Catching Vorgann's eye, Harry smiled very slightly, and slipped a Galleon from his robe pocket.

Taking a deep breath, Harry cast his voice to carry and stopped, three paces from the leader of the Goblin nation. "May the deep earth ever hide your true fortune, Ragnok Dvalinnsynir," he said with a slight bow, his hand going out immediately as did Ragnok's.

The great Goblin's voice set his bones to vibrating, but Harry felt the smile and pleasant surprise in the Dvalinnsynir's words of reply, "May your forge never cool, Harry, blood of Potter." The exchange of Galleons was a complex gesture, both dropping the coin they held between finger and thumb, while the fingers below curled to catch that of the other. Harry had practiced briefly with Vorgann, but was glad of Ragnok's larger stature, and hands, that made the exchange less awkward. The warm coin slid into his palm, and Harry smiled genuinely, sitting to the Goblin's right.

It was a stunned silence that met the two after the exchange. Those assembled at the great oblong table either held a shocked or derisive expression, which Harry took in along with his host. A handful of seconds passed, and Vorgann stood, clearing his throat for attention.

"Come to order, this gathering of beneficiaries.

"We gather, by request of one, Sirius Black, to hear his Will, and carry it out. Upon this intent, let it be heard now if any dispute the right of the named, to do so."

"Hem, hem."

His eyes narrowing, Vorgann pointed to Umbridge, and called her out, "Dolores Umbridge, you sit here, disputed. You are not a benefactor, yet your Ministry demands right of challenge, by law. What contest do you offer?"

The toady woman stood, and with an officious, derisive smile, spoke in her reedy voice, "Inmate KZ390 is —"

"You will address the dead by name in these halls, not by your petty labels, politician," his voice called out over the table, and Vorgann rapped twice on it with his war hammer, having pulled it free during

the woman's short rant. "Remember, that your rule ended when you came under the earth. Speak with respect or go back into the sun."

Umbridge had that look Harry remembered, when he had spoken out of turn during classes. Hand covering his mouth, he nearly laughed at the idea his mind painted, a toad croaking defiantly in the path of a great raging bull. He could faintly feel the squat woman's outrage and stifled his snickering, as she spoke again, voice audibly strained. "Very well. Sirius Black is still listed in the Ministry as being a known and convicted sympathizer of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, as well as a murderer and accessory to murder. By wizarding and Ministry law, Sirius Black cannot make declaration of his holdings, as by law, those holdings are ward of the state." Clasp ing her handbag before her primly, the woman gave a satisfied nod and let her nose rise briefly into the air with an air of finality.

Vorgann took a long breath, and, to his surprise, winked discreetly at Harry as if to reassure him. "The Goblin nation recognizes the authority of laws above the ground. Do any here argue for the rights of the dead?"

"I do, Solicitor." Her voice cast for the room, Amelia Bones stood, much to the annoyance of Umbridge.

"Madam. Bones, I insist you not interfere in the Minis-"

The massive impact of metal on stone made the toadish woman shriek and jump, as Ragnok's own hammer rested on the table now. As Harry watched, small flames licked and scored the stone, as the thing faintly glowed a deep red about its mass, and scorch marks marred where it rested after the impact. "You will respect those who would speak, or you will be cast out of this place. Now be silent."

Umbridge swallowed audibly, losing her composure as she blinked fearfully at the great smoldering hammer. "My apologies."

Vorgann tried unsuccessfully to hide his amusement as he spoke, calling the Reading back into order, "Continue, Amelia Bones."

Taking a breath and settling a sheaf of parchment before her, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement recited in a steady voice her argument. "First and foremost, I contest Sirius Black's status as a convicted criminal."

Umbridge seemed to go livid at this, and was preparing a response when Ragnok swung his hammer up, letting it rest upon a shoulder. Blinking rapidly, the woman stilled and let Madam Bones continue. "One, Bartemius Crouch Sr., under the urging of Albus Dumbledore and evidence damning, had remanded Sirius Black to Azkaban for life without a trial." At her declaration, the table went silent and Dumbledore met the senior Auror's gaze with a cold edge to his own. "Sirius Black's status as a convicted felon is a null point; he was never given a trial."

At this, Albus stood and regarded the head of the table gravely. "Solicitor Vorgann, may I offer my response to Madam Bones statement." All sat transfixed, as Dumbledore seemed intent on refuting Sirius's innocence.

"Proceed, Albus Dumbledore," Vorgann called simply.

Nodding, the aged wizard, regarded the table solemnly. "It is with a heavy heart I must admit to a grave wrong done to Sirius." Those familiar with Sirius seemed to breathe a sigh of relief at those words, and some, Lupin among them, nodded quietly at the announcement. "It was my understanding, in trust with the murdered he was imprisoned over, that Sirius was the secret-keeper of a Fidelius ward. Later, with circumstances uncovered by young Harry Potter," the Headmaster nodded to Harry, a smile on his lips, "that the true secret keeper had been made, one Peter Pettigrew." With a weary sigh, Albus resumed his seat. "Sirius's wrongful incarceration was wholly my error."

"We have the statement," Vorgann said quietly. "Would any add or challenge it?"

"There were witnesses, and there were other murders," Umbridge insisted, her voice quiet but present none the less. "He was

sentenced, if not convicted, by a judge for a crime. Our law clearly states this, and the remittance of holdings based on his crime."

At this Amelia simply snorted and tossed the sheafs of paper upon the table, "During our interview of current held prisoners, under the proof of Veritaserum, we have statement that Sirius Black was neither a collaborator to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, nor present at the crime he was charged with." Glaring resolutely at the toadish Undersecretary, Madam Bones sat and crossed her arms. "Forgive my speaking out of turn, but I will not have the reputation of an innocent man destroyed." Vorgann smiled slightly, and nodded his thanks to the woman for her statement and apology.

Umbridge, not to be shown up before others, faintly sputtered with indignation, "Who gave you leave, Bones? I'll see you sacked fo-

"ENOUGH!" The impact on the table sent sparks flying over the heads of some, and many cringed from the sound and fury of the blow. Ragnok stood, fairly shaking with rage as his hand rested along the handle of his war hammer. "Umbridge! You are hereby expelled from the remainder of this Reading, for contempt of order! You forfeit the right to hear or call on the remainder of the dispersement of the Will in question, and are to be removed from Goblin lands, by force if needed. Leave, or be removed."

"The Minister won't stand for this," the woman hissed, gathering up her bag and standing. "Your kind have no power outside this ba –"

Ragnok bellowed, shaking the walls and floor with the sound. All along the walls, the stone reliefs took up arms and seemed to rally, the echoing roar rousing even the foes within the carvings to turn from their task and answer. The wizards present cringed at the sound, and outside, answering calls echoed. With a panic-stricken look the squat woman turned so fast her ample jowls had difficulty keeping up, as the great doors swung in on the shoulders of the now very angry Royal Guard.

The Undersecretary drew back and simpered, her voice gone high in fright, "You wouldn't dare!"

The Dvalinnsynir barked orders to his guard in Gobbledegook, and Harry suddenly understood the odd language in a new way. Oh, he didn't understand a word of it, but in hearing a warrior-chief like Ragnok snap out orders, he found it to be rather ideal for such. Each language has a flavor, and Harry decided, that Gobbledegook's was of war.

"I dare," the massive Goblin ground out between vicious teeth. "And you can take this message to your Minister.

"Until your weak, soft, race grows wings and takes to the sky, each time your foot falls, it does so upon my house! Now, Begone!" With their Dvalinnsynir's word, the Royal Guard took the squat woman by the shoulders, and fairly threw her from the room, following after as a courtesy, axe and hammer first. The toss gave her room to walk, they figured.

If she did so quickly.

The doors slammed shut again on a stunned and still room, the violence and challenges bandied about still echoing either by voice, or the vast scorch marks upon the table. Through it all, Harry had still that odd, detached clarity. His own mind so harried by the new, arcane currents seemingly tossing it about at whim, still had the focus to see something disturbing in the meeting. Here, representatives of the facets of the wizarding world sat, gathered over the death and bequest of one of their own.

It was a time, and situation demanding decorum and respect. Add to it, the presence of royalty, in the form of the Dvalinnsynir. So far, Harry felt they'd given a piss poor representation of their race. He suddenly didn't care which facet or group he spoke for, but he had to say something in the wake of the idiocy that had just been inflicted upon the gathered.

"Dvalinnsynir, I ask your forgiveness," he said quietly into the silence. Heads turned, and Ragnok regarded him levelly. "We gather in your home, as a favor and service to one of ours. Yet we do nothing but insult your hospitality.

"I would... absolve you of any responsibility to this table, if I could," he offered, not sure that he spoke properly, but hoping his intent were clear enough. "It is our... argument. Our issue. Though I am thankful to you for expelling that noisome toad of a woman," Ragnok snorted in laughter, and Harry grinned as well at that, but went on, regardless. "If you wish to wash your hands of this, I'd be certain that Sirius would share your sentiment."

The Dvalinnsynir seemed to think a moment, before muttering something in Gobbledegook to Vorgann. The Solicitor rapped twice on the table, calling the meeting to order as Ragnok sat again, his hammer free and resting head down on the floor, his hand upon it. "I will stay, Blood of Potter, as your words have cooled my anger. I still wish to see this event, as the Riddle presented is very curious," the great Goblin gave him a piercing look at this, to which Harry felt wholly unable to stand under.

Vorgann spoke after, resuming the Will as if the Ministry lackey's disruption had not occurred. "As none present contest the right of the named to enact his Will, so those present shall witness it.

"To those present, know that any dispute to the dispensation and vestment of possession and property, are to be voiced after the entirety of the Will has been read," Vorgann stated, his voice the droning thrum of a machine as he took up the role again of officiator.

Pointing to Dumbledore, the Goblin called out his name and the relevant passage, "To Albus Dumbledore, the property previously called 'home' to the named of the Will.

"To Remus Lupin, a sum equaling five percent of the liquid assets of the vault, numbering seven hundred and eleven. In addition, a single property to be decided upon, from a list provided.

"To Hermione Granger, a sum equaling two percent, in the way before named. Also, a list of books, scrolls and information contained as an addendum, to be discussed with the recipient alone, or her representation." Vorgann slipped a small silver scroll free, and with a gesture, handed it to the unnamed man Harry couldn't place. He

realized then, that this man must be a solicitor for the Grangers, or Hermione, and wondered why his friend wasn't here in person.

Returning to his master scroll, the Goblin solicitor continued, "To the House Weasley, a sum equaling eight percent, in the way named before. In addition, secondary provision of the remaining properties, upon provided list.

"To Nymphadora Tonks and her household, meaning mother and father should they still live, a sum equaling ten percent, in the way before named. Additionally, Title and deed to the property described under Estates, as 'the nice beach house out at Anglesey'."

At this point Vorgann cleared his throat and looked to Amelia, uncomfortably. "Madam Bones, I'm afraid I need your counsel at this point."

Curious, the senior Auror stood and crossed to the Goblin's side, looking over the golden sheet he read from. "Ah I see. Acting as Head of House Black, he can indeed decree this, but as his state being in mortis, it is up to the current Head Black to fulfill them. As it stands, those are merely suggestions, but the stating of them, as this is the Will of the then-current till the current Head Black assumes Title... " Amelia looked to Vorgann and sighed. "It's complex. For clarity, would you point out, here, the location of that dispensation?"

"Of course, here, you see."

Nodding, Amelia quirked the corner of her lips, a slight smirk on her face. "I see. Well, here is how this shall proceed... " Leaning close, she confided in the Goblin, much to the annoyance or amusement, in Harry and Ragnok's cases, of those present.

"Very well, thank you Madam Bones," Vorgann bowed slightly, and the Auror smiled at him, returning to her seat. "To continue, dispensation of the Title, House and Lordship Black, inclusive of all further and unclaimed properties and assets both material and liquid, shall pass on to one, Harry Potter upon the assumption of his majority. Upon assuming such, the following provisions will become active.

"To Narcissa Malfoy née Black, and Draco Malfoy, a conditional dispensation. Upon proof public and under magical duress, that Narcissa Malfoy née Black is free of Mark of peerage to the one known publicly as Lord Voldemort, previously Tom Marvolo Riddle, she may petition the new Lord Black for assumption of responsibility. To Draco Malfoy, are offered the same conditions.

"If proof cannot or will not be established, then to both parties, nothing. Within the passing of one year from this date, if no proof has been given, then they shall both be stricken from the Blood record, and stripped of name and right, to House Black in it's entirety.

"To Bellatrix Lestrange née Black, the above conditions are also offered, with the following addendum. If contested, or unanswered, directly after this reading and within twenty four hours, the second condition of the above will be enacted immediately.

"These are the wishes, of Sirius Black. Those who would contest, please rise, and stand accountable."

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Harry was fully prepared for a series of rows, starting from the Malfoys and running well into night. What he didn't expect was the standing of all but three parties at the table.

Still sitting was Tonks, with eyes glassy from unshed tears. Harry reached over, and in a gesture that sat them both to blushing, gave the young witch a hug, whispering small assurances in her ear. A few eyes looked at the display with open incredulity, but considering the odd rapport that Harry had with the massive and massively armed Goblin at the table's head, none dared voice it.

Also remaining still was Remus Lupin, who seemed struck dumb with grief. The Werewolf looked on the verge of a breakdown, and Harry desperately wanted to say a few words, something, to comfort his long-time family friend.

The surprise, was the Malfoys. Narcissa was looking at him intently, gone the sneer and cold glance. She looked haunted, torn and unsure, which all nearly made Harry turn from her gaze out of simple shock. This wasn't the sure, poised and proud Lady Malfoy he knew. Even Draco looked shaken, and still held a pallor to his skin Harry was unfamiliar with. He couldn't muster the pity or concern to worry on the young man, but the rather off state of both, had his brain working feverishly.

"Solicitor for the Grangers, please speak." Vorgann's voice pulled Harry back to the moment, and he blinked up at the unnamed man, looking over the list he'd been handed.

Addressing the Solicitor, the man handed back the list. "I need to speak with my represented before I can accept or decline any items."

"The named has one year, to take possession or deny acceptance."

"Solicitor for the Grangers rests. Thank you, Mr Vorgann, if that is all for me?" At the Goblin's polite nod, the man rose again and bowed to the head of the table. "Good day, Solicitor Vorgann, Good day Ragnok Dvalinnsynir."

Both nodded, as the man left without another word.

"House Weasley, please speak."

Arthur seemed to crumble a bit, under Vorgann's rather stern gaze. No one had mistaken the look of contempt that passed between the two Goblins to see so many contest a man's last words and wishes. "No problems, Solicitor. We simply would like to confer with Lupin, and possibly see the named properties, before devoting ourselves to one."

Nodding, Vorgann shrugged once. "Both parties were allowed one year to make such a choice."

Looking relieved, the red-haired man sat, but stood again and remembered himself, "House Weasley rests." So said, he and Molly resumed their seats.

"Solicitor for Lestrangle, speak."

The man looked less concerned about the hearing, as with some internal issue. Sweating, and seeming pale, the man wiped at his brow with a kerchief. "My party would contest the conditional dispen –"

Vorgann rapped his hammer on the table, as Narcissa shook her head, looking harried. "Solicitor, did you not hear the Reading as the rest of us did? Your contest on behalf of your represented has nullified her claim. Additionally, I find you stupid, and a disgrace to our calling. Sit down, and be quiet."

With a huff, the man did so, trying to confer with the Lady Malfoy. All he received in answer, for most his questions was her sneer and a dismissive wave.

"Albus Dumbledore, please speak."

Harry shot a glance to Tonks, who as the Headmaster cleared his throat, pulled out the matchbox sized trunk, containing their files and research.

The aged wizard seemed to regard everyone present a moment, before letting his eyes rest on Tonks and Harry for long seconds. Pulling himself from thought, the man spoke, finally. "I would like to propose a period of Stewardship, assuming the minor Harry Potter's responsibility and Head status until such time as he be emancipated. As his current guardian, I cannot in good conscience, allow a minor to assume the duty as Head of an Ancient House."

"We recognize the argument laid out by the Steward of House Potter, acting for Harry Potter," a slight smile creeping upon his face, Vorgann continued, "Those who would challenge the Steward of House Potter, please stand."

To the surprise of Narcissa, Lupin and Amelia Bones, Tonks stood quietly, facing the head of the table resolutely. Harry had known that there were two ways Dumbledore could work him out of the equation,

and this was the most likely. The other would have been to outright question Sirius's decision, but all present had seen what disrespect would earn them. Disbelief shone on the Weasley couple's face, and even Ragnok leaned forward, a smile on his lips.

Albus regarded the young witch coolly, his eyes revealing nothing.

"I, Nymphadora Cassiopeia Tonks, challenge the Steward of House Potter."

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A/N: Little to say. Additions made to the Preface (First 'Chapter') to address some issues. The remainder of this note will be remanded to a forum, at some point. Perhaps.

Chapter Seven.

The child learns so easily because he has a natural gift, but adults, because they are tyrants, ignore natural gifts and say that children must learn through the same process that they learned by. We insist upon forced mental feeding and our lessons”

–Rabindranath Tagore

"I, Nymphadora Cassiopeia Tonks, challenge the Steward of House Potter."

Those ten words echoed about the hall and no one moved for a long stretch of heartbeats. Harry sat back in his chair, a slow smile working its way onto his lips. His eyes were on Tonks, and though he knew Dumbledore was there, knew he was weighing both he and the Metamorph, nothing could pull his eyes from the witch.

Harry could have stood himself, to challenge his status. He'd almost done so in fact, as it was his place to settle the dispute between his guardian and himself. Yet, here she was. Putting herself between him and those that would hold him back.

It warmed Harry. Many had said they looked after his best interests. Many had called on their actions as being for his own good. Here though someone stood, publicly, and said "I stand not for his best interests, for him."

As for Dumbledore, an amused chuckle and a smile to the rest of the table as if to say, "Ah, youth," were his only response. Yet Harry could begin to feel it – a sense of power. It smacked against his magic, shaking that tree like a winter's bitter wind. It wasn't a new feeling, as Dumbledore's anger and rage weren't new to him. The aged wizard was not enjoying this turn of events.

Two simple raps upon the table face, returned everyone's attention to Vorgann. "A challenge against the Steward of a House has been issued. Know, that such is not taken lightly." Vorgann paused and looked over his golden scroll, as if searching for his next words. Nodding, he looked up and addressed Tonks, "On what grounds do you challenge the Stewardship?"

"Necessity," She answered slowly. "Stewardship is required for the protection of minors from their own mistakes and lack of knowledge. I challenge to assert Harry has no need of additionally appointed Stewardship, as his need for one at all ends tonight, at midnight, along with his minority."

At those words the table erupted into mild chaos. Lupin was pulled from his melancholy by the challenge, and he looked on with mild curiosity, then attention, and now was giving Harry an appraising look, his eyes moving between the young wizard and Tonks where she stood. Draco looked to be confused, and had a whispered conversation with his mother, while Narcissa's eyes never left Harry. At the end of it, she stood, and nodding to him once, sat again.

The gesture's meaning was lost to him – Harry simply watched Dumbledore's reaction, and found his eyebrows rise in surprise. He would have to inquire what that simple act meant, and soon. Voices murmured and whispers echoed about the hall, but Molly's voice was the first to be clearly heard, "What do you mean, Nymphadora! He's only a child – so he will be sixteen tomorrow, you know as well as I that the age of majority is seventeen!" Her tone went waspish as she spoke, no doubt reinforced by her own mothering tendencies.

Harry stood too, at this, and leaned forward on the table, balancing on the palms of his hands. Eyes turned to him, and he gestured to Vorgann to still his hammer, as he'd risen it to restore order. "Everyone, please. Let those who have the floor speak their peace. We've seen the results of disrespect in this room, and I don't think anyone else wants to be cast out on their arse today, do they?"

"Disrespect!" Waving a livid hand at Tonks, Molly regardless of Harry's words, went on, "she's the picture of it! Challenging Albus!" Scoffing, she was finally settled by Arthur, and Harry caught the Matron's eye, his gaze cold.

For so long the Weasleys had been his surrogate family. Like a real aunt and uncle, he considered them and their family. Bright, warm spots of familiarity in his world, that he visited and received the warmth of home and hearth from, if only for a short time. It was

becoming obvious, that despite their caring and concern, they'd only ever consider Harry a child, at least in the case of Molly. Were all mothers so inclined? He thought back on the letters to Ron and her sons and daughter, on the conversations at the Stations and the Burrow. As he held her gaze, he smiled quietly. Yes, that was how a mother acted. Sheltering, concerned, and righteous.

Harry's smile threw Molly off, and she quieted, blinking in confusion. She'd expected the same fiery anger that often enough her own fiery-haired children would level at her with arguments, but here he only smiled.

"Order, please," he asked one last time, and people at the table quieted. Harry gestured to Amelia Bones, and the woman stood again, looking quizzical. "Madam Bones, we may require your help, in establishing what our law states. Are you willing?"

Madam Bones shrugged once, looking between Harry, Ragnok and Dumbledore with a calculating gleam in her eye. "I am, but I am no judge, Harry. My words can only reflect law, not preside on it."

"Law is," Ragnok rumbled suddenly, his head rising up from his contemplation. "When just and true law is worked, it bears weight and is solid. It bears you up." Ragnok's clawed hand rose, as if elevating a precious thing, but his great head shook soon after. "Injustice. False law. Those words spoken and made into rule that only work to take away freedoms," he slammed his hand, palm down upon the table with a mighty crack. "Strike us down."

Draco seemed to be arguing in whispers with his mother, until her hand reached out and pulled him close, wrapped around the young man's head, pulling him in for his ears only.

Dumbledore cleared his throat quietly, and sighed a great breath, "I understand your meaning, Dvalinnsynir, but without one to arbitrate on the side of law here, we cannot in truth uphold any decision that this challenge could see.

"As that stands," He amended quietly, "I restate my desire to act as Steward, until Harry Potter assumes his Majority."

Tonks rapped on the table then, her hand having less impact, but the gesture not lost on any there, "what proofs would there need to be, Amelia, to remove a Stewardship from someone?"

"Gross incompetence. Contradiction of action to the interest of Estate, legal emancipation due to age." Amelia shook her head, looking thoughtful. "The first must be proven in a court, as it is a matter of opinion. The second is as tenuous, but there are precedent that would allow them to act without a hearing." Adjusting her looking glass, she smiled ever so slightly. "The third, by a document only. Birth Certificate, and proof of age."

At those words, Tonks produced a single file, and by way of spell, sent it to Amelia. The senior Auror took it with a nod, and looked over the contents, her brow rising. "This is all well and good, but as Molly had said, he will be sixteen." Placing the file down on the table, the head of the DMLE shook her head slowly, "As we all well know, the age of majority for wizards is seventeen."

"Director, do you serve the Queen?"

The question from Tonks had Madam Bones startled. She looked up and fixed the young witch with a steady gaze and answered her quietly, but firmly. "The Ministry is at the Queen's pleasure."

Tonks removed two more files from her case, and sat them before herself on the table. "All the Ministries of Britain do," Tonks stated, and Harry pulled the files to himself quietly. Opening the first, he guessed to know the contents of the second, but didn't feel them needed. Still, who knew what that gesture from Malfoy meant.

Continuing on her train of argument, the young witch voiced her next point, "Here I have case 145.8, wherein as the heir of a household and being of age of majority in his native Scotland under their law, sixteen, Hawthorne was challenged by the Ministry for Magic, and was granted emancipation under the Queen's law."

At this Arthur shook his head, "No, we can't have it. The Ministry is what we answer to, as wizards. The Queen's rule and law are for muggles."

"Arthur, it doesn't work that way," Amelia responded quietly. "We are custodians, only. The Minister only has power, as far as the Queen and Parliament allow. Where laws that can conflict do so, the Queen's rule supersedes. It's a rare situation, as most wizards ignore muggle law, but there it is." Closing her eyes, the senior Auror rubbed at the bridge of her nose lightly. "That is the basis of the case 145.8. The establishment and assertion of the Queen's law above that of the Ministry, provided it does not conflict with the Statute of Secrecy."

"How can that be then?" Arthur railed, his eyes moving about the table, as if looking for some anchor, "How can it be that we govern, punish, by all rights rule ourselves? We make our own laws, have our own prison! What point is there then, to our laws if some... muggle Parliament can supersede them?"

Surprisingly, it was Narcissa that answered him, her voice quiet but unwavering. "'At Her Majesty's Pleasure', Arthur. You know the phrase. How do you interpret it?"

"We are a people, ruled by ancient, unyielding laws. Yet we live in a modern, changing world," the Lady Malfoy said, meet Arthur's eyes. "The Ministry is our buffer. But we still live, 'At Her Majesty's Pleasure', do we not, Madam Bones?"

"Well said, Lady Malfoy," Amelia conceded, her eyes narrowed at the woman. Despite the source, she amended the argument herself. "The bottom line, Arthur, is this.

"We live in the United Kingdom, Great Britain geographically. As citizens of the Kingdom, we are subjects to her rule, technically that of the Parliament and Prime Minister, these modern days. The term 'At Her Majesty's Pleasure', simply relates that all power they wield, is given by the crown." Amelia sent back the files to Tonks, and sat back in her seat. "Legal precedent is there. As a Scottish-born wizard, Harry has the right to assume his emancipation upon his sixteenth

birthday. It isn't something the Ministry commonly allows, but law is law. The Queen's comes above the Ministry's."

Silence settled on the table, and it was into this silence Dumbledore spoke, "What do you intend to do with your emancipation, Harry?"

"Assume the Lordship Black, and settle that House, as my Godfather had wished." The answer was simple, but it rocked the table with the surety and simplicity by which he answered.

Dumbledore, though was not finished, "And of your own family? Of your own House?"

Harry turned to him, but did not meet the man's eyes. Instead he kept them trained on the Headmaster's hands, where they sat braced on the lip of the great slab of stone. "I will deal with that, and the issues that involve it in time. We aren't here to discuss those things, are we?" With that, Harry turned back to Amelia and nodded once. "Thank you, Director Bones." The woman waved slightly, with an answering nod. She didn't look up however, as she was deep in thought.

Dumbledore sent the young wizard a piercing gaze and it was all Harry could do not to meet it. He knew, very well, that if he did, a great number of his plans would be forfeit. "Surely you've spared thoughts of your own family, during your work? I can't believe you, who take after your parents so much, to have forgotten them in the obvious efforts you've made,"

"I would never forget them," Harry snapped, running his hand across his eyes, a gesture of weariness. "I can only deal with so much grief, so much of my history at a time, Headmaster. So, before you begin tossing about assumptions, keep that in mind." Waspish, Harry dropped his hand and eyes to the papers in front of him, and shook his head slowly. "Forgive my outburst. Lets continue."

In truth, he had come dangerously close to glaring at the man, and that would be folly. Harry knew Dumbledore would like nothing more than to peer into his thoughts, and he also knew this baiting was geared to anger him. So, he kept his eyes trained on Tonks or the

paperwork before him, when he did look up, and filled his thoughts with laughter and song, trying to banish the impulse to meet the Headmaster's gaze.

Vorgann quietly rapped his hammer against the table, and stood. "With the emancipation of Harry Potter, Stewardship of House Black need not be considered. The Will and intent of Sirius Black again stands unchallenged."

"I believe Lady Malfoy, had a question," Harry said quietly, and to everyone's surprise.

Nodding solemnly, the wife of Lucius Malfoy stood and pulled herself up to her full height. "As the only, last and true blood of Black able to attend this Reading, I challenge Harry Potter's assumption of House."

Harry had expected a challenge, but the wording Narcissa has used wasn't what he'd planned for. Apparently, that sentiment was shared across the room. The wizarding folk, minus the Headmaster and Lady Malfoy herself, all shared confused glances and murmured to themselves about this. Harry stood and regarded the woman carefully, remembering all the odd signals she'd been sending through the Reading.

Vorgann regarded the woman carefully, consulting his gleaming scroll occasionally. "We have proof of intent, from the Will. We have an uncontested acceptance from the named heir, and no need to consider a guardian or Steward's wishes. On what grounds, precisely, do you challenge?"

"Simple," She said, drawing a dagger and placing it upon the table. "The Goblins keep a record of the magic of each House. It is by blood that it is called and sorted. A challenge of blood is simply that, Mr. Potter.

"I challenge your blood, and it's right to the House of Black."

With this, Harry understood the gravity and necessity of Sirius's request, and the strange ritual that he'd suffered, before the Reading. Still, he was curious. As the Reading had progressed, Narcissa had

not acted as he expected. She'd been passive at the dispensation of all the moneys listed, even offering her argument in his defense, to Harry's assumption of majority. Why this, then? So, Harry tested the waters, "and if I refuse?"

Narcissa shrugged slightly, a smile curling her lip, but the expression wasn't the cruel twist he'd come to expect. "Then, as per the nature of the challenge, you admit a state of no contest to being outside the rightful line of succession. You will not assume Lordship of the House of Black."

The Headmaster seemed torn, a moment, but shifted in his seat to regard the young wizard in question, "I must say, this puts you in a rather curious position, Harry."

"To me, that's normal, Headmaster." Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, Harry felt at loss. "Correct me, but at the assumption of my majority –"

Lady Malfoy's voice cut him off, "Has nothing to do with this. That was a question of your ability to govern yourself." Reaching down, she took up the ancient looking dagger she's laid upon the table earlier. "This, is a question of your right to govern a House."

"As you are of course aware, wizards can make vows on their magic," Standing the woman walked about the far end of the room, pacing as she spoke. "We bind ourselves, by our word and our magic, to that end. Obviously, such vows have meaning if we can do so." Stilling, at the foot of the table she looked back up and met Harry's eyes again. "Wizards promise much, and it is by magic they do so. Ancient families are as Dumbledore would be – Stewards and protectors of that magic. It is bound to our blood, tied to our homes, laced in the land we rule."

Narcissa rose to her full height, crossing her arms tightly about herself, "The blood of Ancient Houses must remain, pure. 'Always, pure', as my family has said it. In our works of metal craft, in our magic, in our blood itself. I question your blood, Harry Potter. I challenge it's ability to fulfill the promise and vow my House and family have made to the magic we are bound to."

Harry nodded the point, and sighed expansively, in defeat. "Then I—"

"Wait." Tonks's voice rang out, and her hand shot to Harry's shoulder, stilling him. "Lady Malfoy... Aunt Narcissa," one could see what addressing the woman so cost Tonks, but what worried Harry was her expression. Dread, anxiety. Harry's eyes snapped back to the woman who challenged him, and his eyes rested on the knife she held, tucked into her small hand. A chill swept over him as he looked at it, and Tonks voiced the question he was thinking as well. "What if he fails the test?"

"Then he dies," she said simply, looking up to Harry with an open smile.

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The table fairly resounded at the blows of hammers upon it, as both Goblins tried to call the meeting to order, futilely.

Everyone was standing now, everyone but Harry. He sat, watching the meeting through a light haze, as if someone had encased him a great glass bubble, suddenly. He had not prepared for this. Sirius seemed to have, but then — Sirius was dead, and if his attempt to ensure Harry assumed his inheritance failed, so too would he be dead.

Narcissa's hand was apparent now. She'd lulled him into a sense of security, and now he was trapped. If he tried to assume Head of House Black, he had to pass her test. If he didn't pass it, he would die. If he refused the test, then... then what? Could she overrule the Will? She must have some way to do so, if she'd use this as a test. If he refused and she did have a way to take from him the right as Head of House, then she'd likely place herself Steward to Draco, until he could assume it.

He'd be handing all the influence and power that the Black family held, directly to Voldemort in that case. Harry may as well sign the title over now, in fact.

How could he hope to pass a test, based on lineage? Oh, Sirius's Bloodline gave him something, but he was still Harry Potter – not Harry Black. Wasn't that what she was questioning? Grinding his teeth, Harry scrubbed a hand through his hair in annoyance.

Too many damned Riddles!

Suddenly, he felt as if the prank Sirius had alluded to in his letter, was directed at him, and not the others gathered.

"What say you, Harry Potter?" She phased his very name as a challenge, now. Potter, the word dripping with her knowledge that he was very much that.

Dumbledore's voice rang out here, and many quieted at his words, though none went quiet. "Although I do not agree with Harry's intent to take up such a lofty role so soon and with so little preparation or knowledge of what he does, I cannot condone such barbarism and uncivil methods."

"Yes, as Dumbledore says, this is madness! We can't let a boy be subject to such risk. And over what?" The reedy voice belonged to Molly, as she ranted at everyone and no one, her instincts guiding her to simply rail against the threat she saw to one of her own. "Money and politics! He should be worrying about school and girls and bloody Quidditch!"

Arthur turned the woman to him, and Harry imagined him chiding her about language.

Remus looked panicked but lost, unable to really find an argument beyond the words of others. "We can't. It simply isn't right to force someone so young into such a place. Harry, please. Don't do this."

To his left Tonks hung her head in defeat. "We... failed, didn't we? All that preparation. If we lose this, we may as well just hand He-Who-"

rolling her eyes, she took a breath and forced the next words out between clenched teeth. "Hand Voldemort a blank check, hang our wands and lay down to wait." Harry leaned close, rubbing the woman's back gently.

"Tonks?" She turned, removing her hand from before her eyes. He could see they were glassy, pained. The feelings she had then, he knew. Futility, failure. As if everything he'd been planning and working toward, meant nothing. Oh he had his emancipation – and with it, some measure of freedom. Losing the battle here, would only make any further ones more difficult. What would his freedom do then? "It's ok. We lose this battle, and move on. It's just that – one battle, right? Remember Skene," he confided, voice dropping. "We have other goals."

Ragnok turned to him then, and Harry nodded deferentially to the Dvalinnsynir. "Blood of Potter, what will you do here? We must finish this, and we need your answer to the challenge."

"I know, Dvalinnsynir." Turning, he looked to Vorgann, as the smaller Goblin waved to him. Harry rose and moved to his side. "You need me, Solicitor?"

"Yes, Harry. I have a small... insight that may clarify things slightly."

Harry nodded, and followed the Goblin, answering simply, "As you like."

The two moved to the head of the room, and Vorgann motioned across the floor, briefly. A wall, seemingly of very thin stone, transparent and veined and cloudy rose up between them and the room. "We may speak now."

Harry paced, letting his thoughts run their course. "I don't know, I just don't know. You know of the Bleeding?" At Vorgann's nod, Harry continued, his thoughts tumbling from him. "Is it enough? I'm not so sure. I felt it, the connection," gesturing beyond the wall, he stilled. "I felt her, even," spitting the words, Harry fell back against a space of bare wall, as a war raged to either side of him within the stone wall, unseen.

Quietly, the Goblin regarded the troubled young wizard. So lost in his thoughts, Harry was unaware of the scrutiny, till the Solicitor drew attention to himself, "What are you doing?"

"Thinking," Harry replied, rubbing at his temple.

"Why?" Vorgann blinked at him, his black eyes inscrutable.

His mouth working silently a moment, Harry laughed, the question upsetting his already precarious balance. "Why? My life's at stake here, Vorgann!"

The Goblin stood by his side, then reached out, pulling out a Galleon from the young man's pocket. "As is mine, young Potter."

Eyes going wide, Harry fell back against the wall, his body cold in shock. "What. What?"

Laughing, bent over from it, the Goblin seemed to do so only harder the more incredulous Harry became. Eventually he pointed to the Dvalinnsynir and smiled at Harry, his teeth gleaming in the hall's light. "Gold to us is as your Lady Malfoy speaks of vows. Our word, bound to gold, is our bond." The Goblin held up the Galleon, and ran a claw along a small line of runes along its edge. "Each Goblin sets his own gold, with their name. When we pass gold in a greeting, we vow on our honor to uphold that of another.

"In other words, because you exchanged my gold, I stand as your honor before the Dvalinnsynir. Were you to act dishonorable, in this case working to assume that which wasn't yours by right, the House of Black, my life is forfeit."

"Why the hell would you do that, Vorgann," Harry demanded, rounding on the Goblin. "Why?"

The Goblin simply handed Harry back the Galleon and chuckled. "Would you undertake to represent one that you knew to be unworthy, Harry?"

Setting back on his heels as if struck, Harry winced. "I see. So, you placed your faith in me," looking out at the hall, he breathed a sigh. "On me and that I'd do what was right."

"It seems to be a rather constant habit of yours."

Rolling his eyes, Harry leveled a glare at the Goblin. "Well, currently I'm backed into a corner, and now I find there's company there with me. What happens if I don't accept her challenge – to you?"

"I die for your dishonor, at the hammer of the Dvalinnsynir." Smirking a bit, the Goblin ran a clawed hand along his bald head, "the results will likely be there, all over the table as an example."

"Bloody hell," Harry breathed, shaking off the imagery with a shudder.

Shrugging, the Solicitor barked a brief noise, a laugh. "More like bloody table," he corrected.

Grimacing, Harry pulled his glasses from his face and fidgeting, wiped at the lenses. "You're not funny."

"Was it a joke?" Vorgann clasped Harry on the back, pointing to the wall. "We've spoken enough. Your path is set, and you know it. Let us continue."

Harry slumped and nodded, realizing the truth in the Goblin's words. He would have tried the test regardless, but his anxiety had to be given voice. It needed the chance to work itself free, so he could dismiss it easier. Still, he wasn't alone in this. Tonks... Worry and concern he knew Tonks held for him, so did others, but he worried more that she did at the depth he saw. What was growing up between them? She'd taken such drastic steps, done things he'd never imagine another to, and she had reasons of her own, many and varied. Yet, something else dwelled there. Was there more between them, than a shared determination and goal?

Blushing, he recalled her question the first morning, sharing the room with her. She had not sounded... upset, at the idea. Only concerned. Shaking his head hard to dismiss such errant fancies, Harry took a

bracing breath and nodded to Vorgann, stilling him with a hand to the Goblin's arm. "One thing, first. Why? You didn't have to risk your neck in representing me, or for the Reading. Why do so, for sake of my idle worry on protocol?"

Black eyes watched him steadily. "Gold, like magic to your kind, is a measure of our ability. You know of investments, correct?" Harry nodded, brows knitting. The Goblin continued, "The higher the risk one presents, often the higher the reward. You stand to make me a very, very wealthy Goblin, Harry." clapping the young man on the back, Vorgann sent him back into the hall with another barked laugh.

Harry stumbled from behind the screen, as it melted back to the floor. In their absence, the Reading had broken down, left without order. Ragnok sat impassive, his expression schooled to patience and long waiting. At Vorgann's return, he roused and shifted, the sound of his gilt clothing's shifting catching the attention of many. The Solicitor's hammer called them to order again, and Harry stood.

"Narcissa Malfoy née Black," he called, and the woman rose. He kept his eyes forward, refusing to let Tonks's questioning eyes catch his own. He felt them, trying to pry at his resolve, and he schooled himself, refusing to show weakness here. "I accept your challenge."

It was as if he'd set their chairs alight. Harry held up a hand, and stilled the table as one with it, shaking his head once, "I won't be talked down, or out of this. Don't bother." With that, he addressed Narcissa directly, "How do I fulfill my part of this?"

The woman simply held up the dagger she'd been cradling in her hands for many long minutes, seemingly smiling at the wicked thing. "An heirloom. This blade is poison, to any but my blood. A prick, small and simple, will suffice. If your blood is unworthy to carry the promise, the Law of it, then it will reject you. And then, you die."

"Then let us be done with this," Harry answered simply, moving to go the woman's side. As he passed Tonks, he paused, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he murmured quietly, and turned quickly, so not to hear more than the first sob that broke free from her.

When this was all over, he resolved to speak to her. He had too many questions...

Shortly he stood behind Narcissa, and looking to Draco saw the young man finally meet his eyes. In those cool gray depths he saw something he'd never thought to see, not in a place, or situation like this.

Fear. Fear of him.

He looked quickly away, shaken. Narcissa held the knife, handle out to him like an offering. As he clasped it he saw her close her own hand over it's blade tightly, and a smirk light on her lips. Her eyes challenged him, yet again.

Harry's lips thinned to a fine line. He pulled the blade free and the woman shivered, her eyes going closed and lips parting slightly, a tremor shaking hair into her face as the blade bit into her palm and parted the skin without hesitation. The edge was rather keen. As he held the dagger, the blood, as black as the House they fought over, ran down her arm, but the wound on her hand healed quickly. In it's wake a small, crescent scar, white and gleaming. "Simple, yes?" she breathed, her eyes half-lidded.

Swallowing his anxiety, Harry passed to the foot of the table. He looked to the knife, and smiled, mirthlessly. "So. Wounds to those with the proper blood heal, Lady Malfoy?"

"Heal, but leave a scar. You're familiar with those, of course." Her voice fairly dripped with the laughter she was holding back. Yet he could see something in her eyes. It was like he was watching two people, in her. Words, and eyes. Actions and intent.

More damned Riddles.

"And a nick, not matter how small, is deadly to any other?"

"Painfully, and irreversibly," she assured him, rather offhandedly wiping the small trail of blood from her arm, staining her hand. Scandalously, she wiped it along her lips, brightening the crimson of

them. Harry turned from her, and heard the breaking crystal peal of her laugh.

In his hand, it gleamed, still wet with Narcissa's blood. Silver and pale, it was wicked, simple and elegant. It bore the crest of the House Black upon its very design. The crosspiece angled at the blade's marriage, sloping to the sides and back. Upon its either terminus, a star, five pointed sprung. The blade and the handle, black and reflectionless. Upon the blade in silver, twisted hounds, snapping, barking, and chasing one another. Looking to the dagger and then at the table, he smiled, and it was a terrible sight. "Well then, let it be done."

Harry Potter, supposed savior of the wizarding world, drove the blade into his chest and fell, first to his knees, eyes wide and staring. He saw Tonks scream, saw her rise and be held back by Ragnok's massive hand, but the sound wasn't there. Movement, all around, but so far away, all silent. All he could hear was his own heartbeat. Heavy, it beat at his ears. The noise was too much, but when he sought it out, it was the absence of it that rang echoing in his mind. Harry Potter knew darkness then, and nothing more. His hand fell to his side, slack, and there he remained, kneeling with blood staining his shirt, head thrown back and arms out.

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"You stupid, stupid... brave idiot."

Coughing, Harry tried to open his eyes, but more daggers seemed to press at his skull at the attempt. Instead, he tried his voice and found it mostly working. "Take it that I'm not dead then?" he croaked, voice breaking.

"Oh you're alive," Tonks said hotly, and he smiled, coughing again as his chuckling got the better of him. Merlin, his chest stung. "For now, anyway," she hissed, and Harry laughed loud then, a sharp bark of a sound.

His eyes still closed, Harry breathed a quiet sigh and smiled. "Narcissa?"

"I am here, Lord Black." Her voice still held that edge, but there was no sarcasm, no mockery to it. He heard Draco sputter, and a sound like cloth being bunched into a hand, then stillness. Harry wondered at the use of the title, but then realized the implication. He was, Black. Lord of the Ancient House, by all tests and right, now.

Harry still didn't trust his eyes to the light, so kept them shut. The texture and richness of sounds, seemed enough for the moment. Small Riddles, but still filling. Perhaps it was the relief from passing the test, but he still, despite the soreness that seemed to course through him, felt grand. Accomplished. "Did I satisfy your test?"

A pause, the sound of hair falling across cloth. "Lord," her voice was cast low, nearly by his ear. He heard Tonks murmur something, and Draco say for her to be still, before Narcissa's voice took his attention again. "I had to. To satisfy all who would question. Forgive me – one day, touch the Law I bear. You will know all, then." He felt her stand quickly and knew... what she had said was for him alone.

Loudly, and for the rest of the room, she spoke then, "You pass, but I don't recognize you as my Lord. Only that your blood satisfies the responsibility. Now, we shall see if the... man, will rise to the occasion as well. I use the title only in respect, for your... bravery. Or perhaps, foolish bravado. Regardless, you pass the test. Lord Black." Shortly, she spoke quietly, he assumed to Draco from the response, and he heard the sound of a small scuffle. Presently, his head was taken upon someone's lap. Small warm hands smoothed his hair from his forehead, and he smiled, losing a breath.

"Idiot," Tonks reassured him again, reminding him there were indeed, worse things than death.

Chuckling, Harry worked his arms, regaining feeling to his extremities. "Well, at least you're not Molly."

A sniff, annoyed met his words. "I should let her. She'd box your ears, for that stunt."

"Please don't, till I get my eyes working, those are all I have. What with you breaking my nose daily, at any rate," he broke off his jibe, when two fingers jabbed into his kidney and set him writhing on the floor again, groaning.

"If you two are done snogging down there," Remus's voice was amused, but a tightness was in it. Worry, Harry figured. He was beginning to doubt the gesture he'd made.

Perhaps a bit excessive. Effective though. Trying his eyes again, he grimaced. "Next time, I'll just cut my hand."

"There will be no next time, you... careless..." Molly dissolved into quiet sobs, and Harry shook his head, sighing. He'd get an earful, probably a Howler out of her some day, for this.

Sitting up, Harry shook off his the remaining torpor and testing his legs, stumbled to standing. He shielded his still sensitive eyes and looked about the hall, surveying the result. Ragnok looked pleased, as did Vorgann. He shot the Solicitor a glare and moved on to other observations. Dumbledore was quiet, regarding him calmly, revealing nothing. Molly was crumpled against Arthur, and he felt a pang of guilt at causing her worry.

Guilt became fear as he saw Tonks's eyes. Oh yes, he'd talk with her later... or be talked at, most likely. He swallowed nervously, shuffling unsteadily to his seat again. Slumping into it gratefully, he smiled to the table and held his hands out as if to say, 'look, I'm fine!' but no one seemed to relax at the gesture. Sighing, Harry warily ran a hand through his hair and looked to Vorgann. "Are we done, then?"

Surprised, the Goblin regarded him, and nodded, faintly. "Come to order," he intoned, stilling the still milling crowd. When all had been seated, the Goblin continued. "All challenges have been met. None have successfully contested the Will. The Will rests, satisfied.

"Those who have been issued conditions, will be held to them. Tomorrow, Harry Potter shall assume his right, as Lord Black." Standing, the Goblin rapped the butt of his hammer against the floor,

and the great doors swung open slowly. Surprisingly, the first to leave was Albus Dumbledore, followed soon after by the Malfoy's and the Solicitor for Lestrage. Some distance behind, the Weasleys.

Harry wondered at the stiffness, the distance they had affected. He had expected the Weasleys to speak to him, say something perhaps. No, they simply trailed after Dumbledore and left, leaving him with a larger hole within him, that seemed to grow of late.

So many things seemed to fall into it. Tear at it's edges, and howl on their way to the endless darkness within it. The sound of the doors booming against the walls seemed like the striking of an alarm, and he knew, then that the steps he'd taken could never be undone.

He'd challenged and put away the guardianship of Dumbledore, at least in this issue. His own House and the things that accompanied it were hanging there, stars in the night waiting to be plucked out. Calling to him, really. There was something in his blood that seemed hungry, where before today he had knowledge of those things, now he had need. It was an itch... and it caused a chill to run about his spine when that itch seemed familiar.

Those still there, sat or conversed quietly. Harry, lost in thought was silent, but Tonks and Lupin chatted and rambled about, catching up over the last week or two. Happenings, rumor. Ragnok and Vorgann were also discussing something, the Gobbledegook seeming unwieldy in whispers. Harry shook off his reverie and stood. "I'm unsure what to do now, if I need to sign a form, or get a key..."

Chuckling, Vorgann seemed to excuse himself from the Dvalinnsynir and came to Harry's side. "Most of the provision was already made to you before the reading. As you may have guessed, many of the arguments had been prepared for, or steps taken against. For now, all you need is your own Vault key, and a Goblin to take you to your new holdings." Grinning, the Solicitor walked ahead of him slightly. "It just so happens, I am a Goblin."

Harry chuckled as well, and motioned for the two chatting to join him, but they waved him on, and the young wizard's expression fell slightly.

Turning, he sighed a small breath and painted on a smile for Vorgann, as they moved to the Cartways.

"It is... different, when the wealth is lonely. Isn't it?" The Goblin's words seemed to cut to the heart of Harry's thoughts, and he simply nodded. "She is special to you, then?"

Color rising, Harry took a deep breath and sighed. "I... yes. She is a dear friend." Even as the words left his lips, his tongue tasted of ash. He felt as if a vine, a dark, unhealthy something had curled about his heart and wouldn't let him be. "A good and close friend."

"Indeed," Vorgann said simply, and let the conversation drop.

Normally the Carts were a rather rousing occasion, but never had Harry felt too subdued to really enjoy or quake in fear at them. The trip to the personal Vault Sirius had held, number seven hundred and eleven, took a bit longer than his own. A thought occurred to Harry, and he chewed at his lip, mulling it over. "Vorgann, could we... combine? I don't know the process or how these things work, but I'd like to simplify this, in the future."

Nodding, the Goblin, peered at a passing Vault and looked back to Harry, "Yes, to a degree. We can move the holdings of your trust Vault, as well as the contents of any personal ones you hold to another, perhaps the Black or Potter ones." Nodding, the Goblin stood, precariously, as the Cart halted suddenly. "We have arrived.

"Now, the problem with your request, lies mainly with the House Vaults." Gesturing as they walked, Harry nodded, understanding to a degree what he meant. Narcissa's words had sprung to mind, and more than that, the gravity of what he was going to be attempting. Vorgann confirmed as much with his own words.

A House's Vault, wasn't a person's property, so much as the property of all those that House was responsible to. Being the Lord of one, placed a number of people in your care, and responsibility. If one were to exhaust such a holding, the House itself would suffer. As Harry turned at the Goblin's working, he heaved a sigh and stood to look over Sirius's gifts to him.

The doors opened, and there wealth gleamed. Harry regarded it with a dispassionate eye, his lips going thin. "Money. Something I seem to have in great mass now, but having never held it, I have no idea of it's value," laughing slightly, Harry clapped Vorgann on the shoulder, surprising the Goblin. "Tell me, friend. What is wealth to a man who's never held money? There's a Riddle for you."

Striding forward, Harry missed the curious look he'd earned from the Solicitor. Harry looked over the modest stacks of tray-bound Galleons, a single magical trunk, closed, unremarkable. Also present was a small chest of clothes, men's finery he noticed, and a few arms and armors of cunning and wicked design. "Can you tell me something, Vorgann?" Moving the the displayed armory at the side of the Vault, he looked up, but did not touch the gleaming metal items. "Did Sirius make these?"

Vorgann strode forward, and lifted a blade that seemed of a certain style shared by it's fellow, from the wall. He searched it over a few moments, before making a small grunt of discovery. "Do you recognize this mark?" he asked, pointing out the maker's signature pressed and etched into the base of the blade.

Pulling the weapon close to his eye, the young wizard grinned and nodded. The small picture, a great wolfish hound's face rampant in heraldic style, was likely only to be his Godfather's work. "So much more to him than I've seen. More than I'll ever know, likely." He replaced the sweepingly edged blade and took down another, further along the line. This one had more defined lines, seemed forged by a more confident hand.

"It is a pity, that your society has grown so reliant on the security of the state, and it's peace, that any common man can no longer wear a weapon for fear of being killed in the street," the words, though laced with scorn, still made Harry nod. It was a beautiful weapon. It deserved to be worn, displayed. Harry gave it a half-hearted swing and a smile, at it's balance.

"A shame to let it molder here in a Vault," he added, and grudgingly replaced it as well by it's brothers. Admittedly, the young wizard knew

nothing of weapons, swords and their kind. The fascination was there, like with any dangerous thing. Laughing, he turned and inspected the rest of 'his' Vault.

It felt like going through another man's closet. "Vorgann, you know the contents of this?" waving his hand to indicate the Vault, he stood, looking blindly about.

The Goblin went to the portal of the thing, and pulled what looked to be a sheet of metal from the doorway itself. Smoothing it under a clawed hand and against the stone, Vorgann spoke a few words in Gobbledegook at it, and presently Harry could see the familiar lines of the language rusting their way into place. "A moment to set it to your language... and here."

Taking the heavy record, Harry scanned it and narrowed his eyes. "Motorcycle? Didn't expect to find one of those in here. Another favor if I can ask for one, can I get a list like this, on parchment, that updates like the one that you gave me the other day?"

"It will take a small while, if you give me a few moments to get some help, things would go faster," the Goblin replied, and Harry signaled his agreement.

Sitting heavily on the trunk, the young wizard rested his head in his hand, rubbing at a temple idly. All the things in this place – any of them, really – and none of it spoke more than a whisper of the man who owned it. Oh, the weapons and armor were fine works, but what did Harry know? He wanted so desperately to know the man who'd given him, gifted him and come back from exile for him. Nothing in this place, would do that. The Black Vault he expected to find even less, with Sirius's name being stricken from the record and wall as it was.

"What am I doing," he asked the cavernous room, and heard only his own words, rebounding back to him. "Moving against everyone, everything in my world. Could I sit by and just do as Dumbledore had asked, wanted? Even you didn't want that, Sirius." Laughing, he kicked some loose coins about. "Even if I had been complacent, which I nearly was, you'd have upset it."

"All for freedom, that you never had." Shuffling his feet along the Galleons, Harry smirked, "you'd be ill with me. Seeing me like this. So at odds, you'd likely tell me to relax and find some way to enjoy my time, live a while or something." His expression fell, and he stood, letting the iron record clatter to the floor. "I can't do that, as I am. I'm not strong like you were. Or clever like my mother. Perhaps more like my father, but for me it's all accident, not daring."

"Harry," the Goblin's voice roused him from his mumbling, and he stood, walking back to the Vault entranceway. "Here, scrolls of your type, updating."

"Thanks," he murmured, and took them numbly. "If I may, some changes need to be made."

"The trust vault, this, and my family vault, I'd like all placed in one. Let it be my family vault. The trust vault... put it in Tonks's name, instead of a simple tally. Nymphadora. If she'll have it, at any rate."

Moving back to the Cart, he slumped tiredly into a seat and looked to the Solicitor with a blank expression. "Does the Black vault require me to key it, or something? Or am I fine just owning the damned thing?"

Chuckling, Vorgann set their course to the surface, to Harry's relief. "It should answer you, without problem. Can I ask, Harry... what are you going to do?"

"With what? I find myself Lord, if you'll excuse the joke, of a great many thing at the moment."

A slight toothy smile was his response, for a long moment as it seemed the Goblin gathered his thoughts. "You know, that you cannot hold both Houses. Why fight so hard for the one that isn't yours? What do you plan to do with it?"

Nodding at the question, he reviewed the plans he had briefly made. Most, unknown beyond himself, but Tonks, like him, was not used to moving in such ways. The intrigue of politics. The world of powerful

men and wizards. "My Godfather was a good man, but he held a name that was for a long time, both regarded as noble and practically evil. If I can, I'd like to change that."

"You can change many things Harry, but how people think I believe, will be the hardest."

"Indeed," Harry looked out over the caverns they passed, with hardly any attention. "I know I can't hold the House. Maybe I can manage to change some things, before I have to let it go. Replace some seats on the Wizengamot with people who aren't likely to be swayed by money or fear. Or at least remove those that would give Voldemort an easy way."

Shaking his head, the Goblin regarded Harry critically, "Then my advice to you? Don't appoint wizards." Harry laughed, albeit depreciatively and agreed. "So this knowledge you cannot hold House Black, is it why you won't go to the family Vault?"

Shrugging, Harry settled back into the seat as he could, as their way seemed to level off somewhat. "Perhaps. It isn't mine – I did nothing to earn it. I will do nothing to deserve it. It's not of my family, my heritage or really my right.

"I took it, to keep it from the hands of Voldemort. He has as little right as me, and I know he'd do nothing good with it. So, my hands were tied. Stand by and let evil happen in my inaction, or complicate my own life, to prevent it."

"That does seem to be your way, Harry."

"So I've been told," the young wizard agreed, silently happy the ride was over. As much as he owed the Goblins, and Vorgann specifically, this place was growing old to him.

He conversed sparingly to the Goblin as they returned to the main floor, and Harry was lead to a small waiting room, much like the one he'd awoken in what felt like days ago. "Catching up still?"

"Wotcher, how's the money?" Tonks sat, enjoying a cup of tea with Lupin, the two seeming to be getting along wonderfully. Harry picked a seat some distance away and flipped it about, to lean on the back as he sat.

He remained silent some small while, till he felt the gazes of those with him and roused himself with a sniff. "Sorry. Woolgathering. The money... is still yellow. To be fair, it looks good on it."

Lupin fairly snorted his tea, which set Tonks to laughing, but it was brief. She kept looking to Harry as if on the verge of a question, but remained silent. Regaining his composure, Remus did have a few things to ask the young wizard. "Harry, where have you been, these few weeks? We've been worried sick, and by all accounts you were kidnapped, by the things we found."

"Not kidnapped, just escaped. Tomorrow, we shall refer to it as 'relocated', in fact." Grinning, Harry regardless couldn't feel the happiness of the gesture. "In fact, we'll likely be moving for a while yet. Things aren't all so well, to be honest."

Nodding, Tonks sobered and set her tea down. "Where shall we go from here, Harry?"

"I'm not really sure, but seeing as you seemed to be quite ready to move me, last time, why don't you suggest someplace?"

Harry's sudden change of tone took her off guard, and the young witch nearly recoiled from the cold tone he'd lashed at her with. He knew it wasn't fair to put the blame on her – he had been ready to try his own way, as unlikely to work as it would have been. "Really, where can we go? Lets think about it a moment.

"Dumbledore may or may not insist on some angle, bringing me back to him. I don't know the man's mind – I can't. I'm just a bloody student. Who am I to even begin to question him? To move against him? I've been playing at being my own man, and put it into law here tonight." Standing, he began pacing and railing at nothing so much as the air about him. Silently, Tonks and Lupin sat, mute witness to his words.

"Freedom, Sirius said. He kept on and on about it, in that damned letter." Tonks colored at this, and looked to be feeding her own anger, at his words. Harry, at this point didn't care, however. "What freedom? Each step I take for myself, loses me ground to walk on! I can't rely or run to the Weasleys, as obviously they're Dumbledore's. Grimmauld is now truly the same. I have no skill, no resources to set another Fidelius and even if I could, where?"

"Are you forgetting your family property, Harry?" Tonks's voice cut into his ranting, and he shook his head furiously, groaning in annoyance at the wall.

"No of course not. But you were there, the same as me. Dumbledore knows of the place, he was there! If I go there, he knows. You have to think he'd set safeguards, with the trouble he went to to keep it from me."

Throwing himself onto the sitting couch, he heard a snort of laughter from the young witch. "What?"

"I remember you saying something about not throwing yourself dramatically onto couches, some time ago," smirking, she turned back to her lukewarm tea, draining it with a grimace. She'd turned back to seeing Harry still glaring at her balefully. "What then? Should I have left you there? Then what?" Throwing her hands up, she rose and looked to Lupin a moment, sighing and shaking her head slowly.

"Sorry, Remus. Perhaps today wasn't the best day for this," gathering up her cloak, Tonks swept from the room and closed the door behind her with a bang. Growling, Harry kicked at the foot of the couch viciously.

Lupin eyed the young man and sighed. "You know, she talked about what happened to me. She was only trying to help-"

"Help. Everyone is trying to help, Lupin." Sitting back up, Harry narrowed his eyes and looked to the Werewolf coldly. "To be frank, I'm sick of it. What, is there book on it? How to Help Harry Potter, maybe?"

"The Goblins, oh so helpful, really. Why? I'm an investment, apparently. What the bloody hell should I think of that?"

"That perhaps they have some faith in you, to grow into something great," the former Professor retorted, leaning back and regarding Harry calmly, despite the young man's anger.

Harry waved off the logic and seized on his next irritation, "The Weasleys would bury me in their home, suffocating me with their protection. Protection! Who was in the Department battle? Not them. Arthur was nearly put down by a damned snake, for-

The impact of a hand striking something resounded through the room, and Lupin stood grim, his hand bunched in Harry's robe, his hand reddening where he'd smacked the young man across the cheek. "Quite done now? Ready to stop reacting and start thinking?"

Glaring death at the Werewolf, Harry shoved himself free of Lupin and stood, livid. "What the hell?"

"You seemed intent on going on, calling out everyone's hurts against you till the sun rose tomorrow, so I thought to cut to the chase and save us both some time, Harry." Running a hand through his graying hair, shifting it out of his face, the harried looking Werewolf pushed the young man into a chair roughly. "Sit."

Taking the chair Harry had turned and sitting in it much the same way, Lupin regarded his last connection to two of his greatest friends with concern. "Look, Harry. What do you think it means, that people are trying to help you?"

"To control me, stifle me. Set my feet for me, or use me to their advantage," he snapped, refusing to meet Lupin's eyes.

Remus watched the young man avoid his gaze for what seemed a long minute. Eventually he stopped trying to catch his eye, and rubbed at his temple, voicing his own thoughts, "We've done you a great disservice then, Harry. I'm afraid we can't live up to those expectations, not all of us at least." Rising, the man shook his head and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. The young man shook it off,

angrily. Sighing, the former Professor crossed to the door and opened it, pausing in the portal. "Most of us do it, because we care, Harry."

The retort died on his lips, as the door shut on the Werewolf, and Harry screwed up his eyes, and wept, unsure why, unsure for who.

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"How is he?"

"Hurting, angry," Lupin sighed, as the sun set on them, light dimming as the shadows stretched out across Diagon. It was an unpopular place they'd picked as a bench, but at least the steps to the side of the Bank weren't as often traveled. He turned at her snort and watched as the young woman kicked viciously at the step below her, with the heel of a boot. "Going to scuff the leather, you know."

She huffed and glared at him. "Sod off, I'm not up for humor here."

Laughing a bit, Lupin let free a deep breath and looked to the sky, as if begging patience. "You two... are far too alike."

"I should take offense at that, considering the childish way he's acting at the moment," Tonks snapped, ripping small pieces from the copy of the Prophet she held, the title a silly pretense at slurring Harry again. 'Back in Black?' it touted, and went on to paint a picture of the Boy-Who-Lived, who's unhealthy infatuation and closeness to the known criminal Sirius Black, would inevitably result in the young man's path as the next great Dark wizard. The Will was of course mentioned, and great sweeping claims of him taking over the Wizengamot, buying up the wizarding world, and placing himself as Minister were brazenly claimed. Nevermind there was already one Dark Lord at large, who never seemed to make the paper. Nevermind that no other Black had used the fortune or influence to become Minister. Nevermind they had no idea, even, who or what Sirius was at all. She tore the pieces of the paper free, crumpling them up in to

small balls and tossing them at the pigeons that sat and stared at her, dumbly. "Bloody flying rats," she hissed, and launched another volley.

She rounded on Lupin as he laughed, and swatted him with the paper. The result was a shocked look, which dissolved in to a great gale of amusement, and realizing what she'd done, Tonks too chuckled. "I guess I am being a bit... rash."

"Perhaps," Lupin replied with a shrug. "He needed a close friend. Needed a confidant, or an accomplice, depending on his path. As it was... no one could be that for him. Things have gotten too strained," sobering, the Werewolf leaned back against the marble pillar and let his memories come back to the fore. "Albus is frantic. He goes on about Harry and the Prophecy, and I wonder if there's anything else on his mind. Oh he's calm on the surface, but some things you don't say, with words."

"Don't follow," Tonks mumbled, half her attention on tearing out the "P" in from the Prophet's header whole.

"Helps to listen, I find," he retorted, earning him a barked shin from her boot. Wincing as he rubbed feeling back into the bone, he sighed and explained, "Werewolf senses, Tonks. He's so anxious he reeks of it. It's a wonder he's not worried himself into a heart attack."

Tonks boggled at him, and laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, at one hundred and fifty, and laid low by a heart attack? I doubt it," still, she stilled her hands, thinking over what he'd said. "He does seem to be relying on Harry a lot for this. I suppose it must be the Prophecy, that's leading him on." She knew it, of course, having been told by the Unspeakables themselves. It felt a bit too much like deception, for her tastes to go on as she was, "So, what of the Order, then?"

His brows rising in surprise, Lupin looked at her curiously, "I... wait. I thought the Order was bound to a vow with a memory charm?"

"No, the Order's vow is about betraying it, to an enemy. It'd kill or leave the one who broke it a squib at best." Smiling mirthlessly, she shrugged. "Obliviation works as well. Hold on before you get up in arms." Warding off his scandalized look, she stood and stretched,

looking out at the thinning crowd, some of their number journalists who'd hoped to catch a look at Harry Potter, the next Dark Lord... Scoffing she returned to her train of thought. "He had to protect the Order. I did, as far as I let him know, fail in my duty. It was only fair he remove me in truth. Doesn't mean I didn't take steps."

Shaking his head in shock, Lupin looked to his hands, unsure. "How can you be so nonchalant about it? I mean, he could have erased you entirely, or who knows what else?"

Smiling, she turned and shrugged. "For all his manipulation, his black and white vision... Dumbledore is one of the good guys, Lupin." Sitting again, she leaned back on the same pillar, and looked back to the setting sun, eyes shifting to mirror the bruised colors. "He's doing his best, maybe misguided, but what do I know?"

"I'm just a wash up Auror, who got too close to the person I'm guarding," and laughing to herself, she drew up her knees below her chin, wrapping her arms around them loosely. "He's not the enemy. Maybe he's relying on Harry too much, maybe he's getting old and not thinking clearly. I don't know, but I took steps, knowing what I had to do. I'm protecting myself, but I'm also not going to demonize him."

"You seemed fine challenging him today, in the Reading," Remus observed, but he didn't feel the argument, in truth.

"Just because I don't think him the villain Harry sees, doesn't mean I can't disagree with him."

Lupin blinked, watching the young woman before him become something wholly different than he'd known. He knew Tonks, like everyone seemed to. Quirky, bubbly, somewhat light hearted and immature at times. She was still the best Auror of her age group, and Moody had great hopes for her. Perhaps he should have focused on that, and recognized her as the bright woman she really was.

Really is, he amended. Watching her, and Harry, during the reading he could see the brief time they'd spent together had build some bonds there. And then she had to go and remake herself in front of him, showing her deeper understanding and acceptance of those that

had moved against her. How easy would it be to hate Dumbledore for what he did? But no, she considered his ideals. His motivations.

Tonks took steps to protect herself, but didn't lash out or undermine the Headmaster, except to support Harry. That of itself, spoke volumes. He'd been somewhat skeptical, but in truth... who was he to argue anything? For all his mourning and high goals for those others with his sickness, what time and place did he have, to look for a relationship? That he'd considered Tonks for such, fouled his own first argument. Harry and the young woman were only six years distant, to his what, thirteen? Laughing, he earned a curious look from her and he shook his head, smiling.

Yes, they were much alike. Kind, too understanding, hurt deeply, and needing someone, desperately, to hold on to. "You should go back inside, see if he's calmed down somewhat."

"I really don't think he wants to talk to me right now, Remus," she answered, and he hid a smile at her sadness in saying it. Yes, they were close. More so than they likely wanted to admit.

Standing himself, the Werewolf dusted off his seat and grinned at the woman, "I think you're actually the first person he'd want to. And the best, right now."

Nodding slightly, her grin wasn't lost to him. She'd turned to go inside and rejoin the young man, when a series of Apparations echoed nearby, and the two froze, wands drawn on them from various sides.

Blue robes parted, and a grim looking man, rangy red hair a mane about his severe face stepped forward. He nodded to Lupin, but spared him little attention, looking instead to Tonks with a hard edge to his eyes. "Former Auror Nymphadora Tonks," he greeted, but there was little warmth to it.

Lupin recognized the man as Rufus Scrimgeour, one of the hopefuls that was working his way to prominence, within the Ministry. With Fudge's weakening power and, many felt, imminent sacking, the man was well poised as a long standing enemy to the Dark to move forward and take up the mantle. As head of the Auror office he was

essentially lead investigator and officer there. What confused the Werewolf, was that he was leading a strike team of Aurors... and apparently Tonks was their goal.

"What can I do for you, Auror Scrimgeour?" She'd stilled, but her eyes were nervous, as she looked over former coworkers and her superior, all grim faced and refusing to meet her eyes. All but Rufus himself, who as ever, wore his work as a mask.

Nodding in recognition of his name, the man regarded the two, eyes revealing nothing behind his glasses. "We had reports of your presence inside Gringott's today, for the reading of your recently-exonerated cousin's Will. I regret that this must happen, on such an already grim day for you, but your actions have left us little choice.

"Nymphadora Tonks, you are hereby remanded to custody, for the supposed assault, kidnapping and or abduction of the minor Harry Potter," turning, he left the stunned pair and motioned for the Aurors to move forward. "Remove her to the Ministry, for questioning."

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A/N: I understand a difference of opinion, and how we must, regardless, agree to disagree. But I would ask we not do so in reviews. I shall build you a forum, if you wish to discuss.

Personal note.. though this story is riding me more than I'm writing it, I'm finding the 13-14K words a day I put into it, tiring...

For those of you asking questions about the Girl in Gray – patience. Much like the wand, give it time. Not everything in life is understood quickly. Give it time.

On cliché's... I see the word bandied about a lot. To be honest... yes. And I'm trying to write them in such a way, as to lessen them. Much is on purpose. Yes they're old. Perhaps why, is that they work well. Or that they're just common observation. Reasons abound. I am trying

hard not to make anyone two dimensional. No one is who they are, without reason, and I plan on going into a lot of reasons.

I enjoy Lord Dwar's work too much, to let it be called into question on my behalf. Thank you, but please, lets not make lines in sand.

Chapter Eight.

The world's great day is growing late,
Yet strange these fields that we have planted
So long with crops of love and hate.
–Edwin Muir, One Foot in Eden

The staccato sound of Apparations rang about the small nook, and Lupin leaned back against a wall staring off to the distance, unseeing. Who's hand was moving in this, and for what purpose? Motion, out of place in the crowd caught his eye, and he noted the members of the Order and some others milling about, seemingly at random in the crowd. No doubt meant to corner and confront Harry when he left. Checking the turn of his cloak, he noted his Order pin was still warm from a missed message – a summon likely from those present. Smirking to himself, the werewolf sent a small thanks to whoever was watching over his luck, and asked for her to spare some for Harry as well.

Within the bank itself, Harry sat staring at a small letter, delivered to him by some anonymous Goblin. Thoroughly tired of dealing with and dwelling in the bank, he dreaded the contents, as most likely it was some other thing that needed his exhaustive focus and would have him poring over books till his eyes ached. Smiling wryly at his dark mood, he none the less tore free the small note, and read.

Harry James Potter, Heir-apparent to the Lordship Black,

Provision was made, in the Will of your parents to have you receive certain materials upon the assumption of your majority. Due to the unsealed state of the Will, and your earlier than expected emancipation, we will be holding these items for you in expectation of your visit to us, on or after the thirty-first of this calendar month.

Please forgive the short notice.

Falrod, Sec. For Vorgann

His smile seemed to lose some of it's warmth, as he read. "So, he has a secretary now? Interesting. Suppose things move more quickly

under the earth than we think." Folding the letter away to a pocket, Harry stood and stretched, his muscles still weary and sore from his earlier theatrics and the long meeting. He wondered a moment as to the nature of his parent's wishes, what it would be they'd leave him, specifically on his majority. As he was doing so, the door to the small room banged open and a harried looking Lupin stepped inside, to Harry's surprise considering the less than pleasant conversation earlier.

"Didn't really expect to see you again so soon, Professor." His voice didn't carry the anger it had earlier, Harry having had time to calm himself and sort his thoughts. Still, there was little warmth there for the Werewolf.

Nodding distractedly, Lupin seemed to be looking over the room as if searching for something he'd lost. "Yes, I'd not thought to bother you again, rather let you work out the anger for yourself. Seems we never get time to just sit and chat though, does it?" Smiling, Lupin met Harry's eyes finally, the worry and anxiety there apparent.

Harry was immediately on edge. Little shook Lupin, as the man had seen, and endured, more in his life than may could hope to imagine. "What is it, something's wrong isn't it?" His voice went somewhat brittle at the end, as the long week of work, then the day's own difficulties were wearing the young wizards reserve of will thin.

"Indeed. Seems some Aurors had it in their head to take Tonks. Scrim-"

His voice loud enough to make the Werewolf wince, Harry cut the older man off, "What? When? She was just here!"

"Just now, Harry. Calm down, we need to think," gesturing for a couch, the Werewolf himself sat, and stared at the Boy-Who-Lived till he, throwing his hands up in resignation, did so as well. "Good. Now, apparently, they took her for your kidnapping. There were quite a few, and even the head of the Auror Office Scrimgeour was in attendance. Something isn't right about this."

Laughing briefly, Harry shook his head, upsetting his glasses momentarily. "Aside from the fact it happened? But kidnapping, no, they couldn't, could they? I'm... oh."

"Yes, still a minor till midnight tonight. So any charges they have, stand. In this case, I expect it to be an abduction charge, as you were a minor at the time." Lupin had grown quiet, retreating to his thoughts for a moment. "I suppose after midnight, all you would have to do is show up on your own, to dismiss those charges." Narrowing his eyes, he shook his head faintly.

"I can't go before?" Groaning, Harry rubbed at his face with his hand, leaning back against the chair in his weariness, "Merlin, this day just goes on and on. I'm nearly tired of it."

Chuckling, Lupin pulled his own chair closer, and patted the young man on the back briefly. Heartened that he didn't react angrily, the last Marauder gave the situation some thought, "I know, Cub. I think there was enough of this day to satisfy any of us, about halfway through that Reading."

Harry laughed quietly at this, "Oh, Sirius warned me. Said it'd be a rather good show. I wish he were here, I'd black his eye for this."

"I'd make it a matching pair for him," Lupin added, and the two shared a grin, relaxing and regarding one another more amicably. "So, what shall we do about Tonks? I don't expect this to be a marathon trial, but something smells wrong here. I worry on who precisely is pulling the strings."

"What do you mean?" Harry had looked up from his hands at this, eyes going cold, "Who would be – oh. That dusty old bastard-"

Reaching out, Lupin took hold of Harry's arm as he was about to stand, and pulled him back into his chair. "I don't know, but we can find out soon. Immediately, we have to worry on somewhat else, and plan a way out of here."

Rolling his eyes, Harry let himself be pulled back into the chair. "Plan a way out? In about six hours I can undo all this. Why waste the

time? We can go in, do what meetings and paperwork are needed to have it ready by midnight at this point, so lets hurry over there."

"Because, waiting outside are a good number of the Order, and I don't think it wise to go striding off half-cocked, your mind elsewhere when they seem content to wait for you."

Harry did still at this, and looked over at Lupin suspiciously, "The Order? And why aren't you with them then?"

The Werewolf laughed darkly and pulled at his cloak collar, showing the phoenix pin bunched up and glowing angrily where it sat. "Tonks had cuffed me, grabbed my cloak a moment some time ago. Seems she'd folded it under and by chance I'd not noticed it."

"That aside, Lupin," and now Harry did draw back, eyeing him warily. "Why are you warning me, of them? Why are you here and not there?"

"Partly for you, partly for a debt I've left unpaid for more than a decade, and partly for a witch with much too kind a heart, who's been stolen away for doing the right thing," with this, Lupin's lips thinned to a fine line and he stood by the door, beckoning to Harry. "Come along, I'll explain better later, but for now, we have to get to safety, and plan."

Shaking his head slowly, Harry stayed where he was, watching the Werewolf. "I don't know if I can trust you."

Those words did more to Remus than he wanted to admit. Regardless, with Harry standing there, wearing the same face as James and saying the same things his friend had said nearly sixteen years ago, old wounds reopened and the Werewolf's vision went red at the edges. Bounding across the room in a stride, he had the young man up against the wall, face pressed to the boards in barely a moment. "No, you can't, Harry. Right now, you can't trust anyone, because there are simply too many people arranged against you." He had been practically snarling his words into Harry's ear, the Werewolf took a handful of deep breaths, reigning in his anger and hurt.

Relaxing his grip on the youth's robes, he let Harry fall back to his feet.

"Right now, Harry, I'm all you have. Go out there, walk into Dumbledore and his Order, and let them drag you off to Privet, or Grimmauld, or the Burrow." Remus looked Harry over once, as the Boy-Who-Lived tried to regain his composure, "Can you stand up to the Order, face to face and defy them in the street?"

"I won't be made to go anywhere against my will again, Lupin. Never again," the young man replied, turning against the wall to face Lupin, the resolve clear to see in his eyes.

Snorting, Lupin laughed and finally crossed to the door, "Fine attitude, yes. Can you do anything about it? Apparate yourself? Have a Portkey about you to get you free of their net?" Shaking his head, the Werewolf grinned at him darkly. "Fight your way through them? Perhaps seek asylum with the Goblins?"

Despite his stance, Harry knew he wasn't able to do as Lupin said. If he left on his own, now, he'd be an easy target, and until the stroke of midnight tonight it would be Dumbledore's right to take him. He knew there were Aurors in the Order, and had no pretenses on being about to fight them off on his own. After Vorgann's gamble, he also didn't want to press the issue with the Goblins. It could be a simpler way to stall for time, but in truth he just didn't know how the politics involved would work themselves out. Add to that not having anyplace to run to, as well as barely a clue about the Ministry or any other way to help Tonks... "Alright. Alright, I get it." Raising his hands in defeat, the young man stood, waiting.

Nodding and motioning toward the door for Harry, Lupin grinned, and this time it was genuine. "Good. At least now you're thinking with your head, and not your heart. We'll need both for this, but for now I just need you to listen."

Harry moved to get his cloak, settling it about his shoulders, "I am. What's the first step then, Moony?"

"A brief stop to somewhere safe, then we head to the Ministry once we've prepared ourselves." Harry said nothing, but followed the Werewolf as he lead him toward the doors and the supposedly waiting Order. Lupin pulled up his hood, and Harry followed suit, not wanting to be spotted idly from the street.

It wasn't going to be enough, Harry knew, as at least Dumbledore and Moody could pierce simple Disillusionment spells with their own vision, and Dumbledore could apparently see through his father's cloak entirely, but maybe it would allow them the precious moments it would take for Lupin's to get them away, and work on some scheme to get Tonks free of the Ministry.

From the concealing shadows of the doorway Harry could see Lupin was telling the truth. He counted three of the Order among the crowd that he could see. Likely there were more that he couldn't, hidden from view or simply overlooked. Dumbledore was openly chatting about something with Elphias Doge, the two old men seemingly caught up in their talk. Oddly it was this scene that kindled Harry's ire toward the man more than anything else.

Eyes narrowing, Harry wondered how many times could he could have stood there, with friends and acquaintances? If his life were lead in the way it should have been, never mind that he had so little idea of that, how much happiness could simply having the freedom to walk out of his house and meet a friend bring? Even as a normal muggle child, he could have had some happiness, some freedom to simply be out, in the world without the threat or darkness of his supposed 'home' over him. That the old man stood there, careless and uncaring of it all only fanned the flames in Harry's heart.

Flames he clapped a lid over, letting them smolder for now. "What plan, Lupin? What do we do?" As he asked, his eyes regardless never left the Headmaster. He wished then more than anything else to know why, why it was he, more than the Marauders his parent's kept as confidants or the families they were a part of, was made so central in his life. Was it the Prophecy – was that all? It didn't make sense if so. Would he not be a better weapon if he trained from an early age to be one? Why keep information, training from him for so

long, if that were the case? If his destiny was to kill, there was little preparation for the event.

It almost seemed that Dumbledore wanted Tom to triumph against Harry. The thought chilled him, and he dismissed it as foolish, but it nagged at him.

Tom and Dumbledore. If the Headmaster were truly as powerful as he seemed, why didn't he simply destroy Voldemort then, in the Ministry? Was he weaker than Tom? The implications staggered him, but on top of it all, rested the Prophecy. If I am to kill Tom, defeat him at least, then I have to be stronger than him, have some power he can't defend against or that would simply overwhelm the Dark Lord, he reasoned. Either I have a secret talent he can't in his... what? Nearly fifty eight years now, if he counted the time he spent hidden. Or something will happen and I'll gain it in time.

On the assumption he was stronger than Dumbledore... how could he possibly kill or defeat Tom? What madness had to be in the mind of the Headmaster to assume someone with what he knew, what he was capable of, could go forth somehow and defeat the Dark Lord. He was barely managing his classes! A Fifth year education, and that crippled in the way of Defense. Perhaps he was waiting to train him, waiting to accelerate Harry's learning – no, not possible. If Dumbledore was working for the Light, just waiting to train him for some opportune moment, then the time involved to train him would be bought in the blood of innocent men and women.

The alternative was that he would not kill Tom... and that brought up a whirlwind of thoughts Harry could not abide. Later, he pressed, closing that storm away.

It made no sense. Thousands had reason to kill him, countless innocent lives lost, countless families broken, yet here he was. One angry young man, untrained, barely managing an education at all within the web of intrigue laced through Hogwarts, was to do what no one else could.

Harry chose that moment, despite the losses it had cause and the cost to so many, to forget the Prophecy, and the weight it put on him.

It may stand, may be truth to those that believed it, as many seemed to, but to Harry it was nothing more than a cunningly worded lie. One more tool to be used against him. If a damned Riddle were to be the force that shaped his life, he'd be the one to word it.

He would no longer be driven, by or before the doom someone else spoke.

"Stay behind me, we need to step past the foot of the stair, to cross Gringott's Apparation wards," Remus was saying, as Harry pulled himself from his thoughts. "When we do, stumble into me, as if tripping, and be sure to take solid hold of me."

Nodding, Harry took out one of the scrolls, parchment that detailed the minutes of the Reading, and pretended to read over it, as Lupin strode forward. Taking a place a few steps above the Werewolf, Harry followed, and smiled as he took his third step, remembering a stumble he'd taken only a few hours before, in similar circumstances. With a mumbled gasp and a foot tucked into his robe he fell into Lupin, and with a crack they were gone.

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The afternoon wore on, and time passed far too slowly for the Headmaster's liking. Five of the Order were there, to help convince Harry of the necessity to return to Privet. His eye slipped to the crowd, and he picked out his few allies among them. Moody and Shacklebolt were there, in the event that Nymphadora were to resist their efforts. A very slight tremor quaked his lips, the seeds of a smile.

If all were going as planned, she would be dealing with the consequences of her own actions, soon. Likely the need for his two Auror companions should be significantly less.

Almost three hours since the reading began, the old wizard noticed one of his fellows, Elphias Doge coming heading to him and with a question alight in his eyes. "Ah, Elphias, busy day we've had today.

Thought I'd wait for the afternoon, see the sunset on the market and then possibly have a snack at Fortescue's."

Shooting him an odd look, Doge simply shrugged and replied, "Indeed, it's been some time since I've seen the sun set over Diagon. Not quite the markets in Venice, but nowhere is." The Wizard was in his plum-colored robes, which made a nice contrast to the sky, Dumbledore thought. Elphias always had impeccable taste in wizarding clothes, but his muggle sensibilities in the same were rather odd.

Nodding his understanding and agreement, the Headmaster smiled faintly, sweeping his eyes across the bank steps. Still no sign of the boy. "How go things within the Ministry, these last few days, while I've been attending school matters? I hear there are some... strong currents of change sweeping about."

Elphias smiled without mirth and looked at the Headmaster, his gaze lightly appraising, "Ah, I am disinclined to think much there passes your notice, Albus. To answer your question simply, yes. Things are changing, and quickly, from all appearances."

"Humor me with some details," Albus said simply, peering over his glasses simply, before letting his eyes slide back along the crowd behind them.

"Very well," Elphias sighed, looking to his hands a moment, as he tried to recall all that had recently occurred. "Fudge, with his seemingly poisonous reputation, is well and thoroughly on the way out. To be honest, even the Prime Minister has gotten wind of this-

Albus shot out a hand and took Elphias by the shoulder, shocking the other wizard into stillness. "Prime Minister, you say? Word has spread to the muggles then. Another of Cornelius's failings in duty."

"Quite," Doge agreed, loosing Dumbledore's vice-like grip on his upper arm. "Regardless, the body of evidence is too strong. No one wants the fool to remain, at this point."

Agreeing absently, Dumbledore's eyes snapped up to the bank steps, as he kept his face to the wizard before him. Two cloaked figures were leaving, but both were male. He didn't think Harry to have any other allies, but something about the second caught his attention. "Elphias, what news then, of his replacement?"

Shaking his head slowly, the man laughed, "Well, as he's not properly fired yet, people are more concerned about jumping ship, than swinging their own colors. I do recall a man by the name of Scrimgeour who was speaking during one of the internal Department meetings." Shrugging, Doge noticed the Headmaster's distraction and began to turn himself, but a short shake of the man's head stopped him.

"Rufus, then... hrm." His eyes, behind their half-moon glasses narrowed as the second man tripped and fell into the first, the two neatly landing on the ground below the steps, then Disapparating with a crack that set a few people nearby to scattering in fright.

"Call the Order," he told Elphias simply, running a hand along his brow in tired resignation. Doge looked behind him at the sound of Apparation, but turned back in confusion at Albus's words. Looking to the wizard patiently, Dumbledore took out a small mirror, and turned his back to the ministry wizard. "Moody, what did you see?"

Mad-Eye's image swam a moment, before settling solidly. "I think the man in the lead was Lupin. Not sure on the second, that paper was enchanted and my eye wasn't seeing through it."

"Lupin... What would he still be doing in the bank? What indeed..." Albus's thoughts were rapid, but he kept rounding on the same conclusion. "What news from the Aurors?"

The retired and recently reinstated Auror gave him a slow nod, his gaze unreadable. IT took him a long moment to answer, nearly long enough to prod Dumbledore into asking his question a second time. "Tonks was taken in. Likely no more than an hour ago." With that, Moody dropped the connection, and Albus nodded to himself slowly.

Quietly, the man nodded, as if to some unseen speaker. "These games you play Harry, have no place on the table, and it begins to cost me more and more important players." Dumbledore shoved the small mirror into his robe hastily, and swept his robe about him, leaving a harried Elphias Doge to call and contact each Order member on his mirror, where the Headmaster could have summoned them with the pin.

As he passed down Diagon lost in thought he came suddenly to the dark and boarded up face of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, and paused in surprise. His brow rose as he remembered, some weeks ago perhaps it was, reading that the man had been publicly executed late one night outside his own shop by Death Eaters. He stood there, looking over the now-bare shop front, remembering the colorful umbrellas and tables that often were peopled at all times by young and old alike, from the store's early open to close. Troubled by his own mistake earlier in mentioning the place to Doge, Dumbledore Apparated to Grimmauld.

An hour later found them, the collected Order, back in the darkened kitchen of the former Black Manor. Those missing lessened the press of bodies and the stifling air, yet their lack echoed in a hollow way. Vance, Lupin, Tonks and Snape numbered four, with two of those not answering the call, one missing, and the other unavailable with his work in the enemy camp. Dumbledore took stock and found a disheveled group, unsettled and mumbling. Enough word of the Reading had spread, and to that, Albus was quietly thankful that Harry had only found out enough to get his legal emancipation enforced, and not focused on his family's will. Likely the reason was freedom from the Ministry itself, and from his aunt and uncle as an aside. Outside of those reasons, Dumbledore could not fathom a sufficient reason to drive Harry to such research and study, so suddenly.

As well, Dumbledore could not see the reason for Harry's insistence on assuming the Black fortune and title. His limited experience with politics said that at least was unlikely to be the cause for such focus, but vengeance against Fudge could also be a motive. Perhaps the boy could be swayed, to use those seats that the Black House held in service to the Light? Surely, with the Black's Dark leanings up to

recently would reflect in the Wizengamot seats they allowed. If Harry could be swayed to place some key figures, they'd have a driving force in the Ministry. Filing the thought away for later, Albus raised his eyes to the table from where they'd wandered. "Come to order, ladies and gentlemen."

Quiet stole over the group, slower than usual. Regarding them with a smile, he spread his hands and looked around at the group, taking in each gaze and face individually, for a small moment. "Good news, friends. Our safe haven has been secured. Today, Grimmauld becomes the sole property of the Order, and we can rest in it's safety." Murmurs rose at this, and most voices were relieved, at least in part. Questions had been raised at Sirius's death how the manor house, and their own headquarters were to be handled. Dumbledore was quietly pleased the man had the good sense to see it's necessity in the fight, and had done the right thing.

"Now, for the not so grand news. It would seem our previous ally, Nymphadora Tonks was apprehended today, to be questioned in the abduction of young Harry Potter." It was with some gravity that Albus bowed his head at this, and raising his hands, quieted the now furiously speaking group.

"Alastor, if you could please let us know the status of this. I'm sure those present would like to know," nodding to the Auror, the Headmaster took a seat and folded his hands patiently.

Moody took that moment to rap his cane, and people stilled at his disquieting gaze. "She'd failed to report in, and was listed as on indefinite leave, when there were inquiries on her status these past weeks," heaving a sigh, the now reinstated Auror sat heavily. "Time was too close to when the whelp went missing. Too many coincidences, and they stop looking like it."

"But there isn't proof, is there?" This from Charlie Weasley, a pained look on his face. Some had suspected a romantic situation between the two, if not recently, then historically. To answer, Kingsley shook his head slowly.

"There isn't anything like hard evidence, no," Shacklebolt replied, but he rubbed a hand over his head slowly, looking pained. "She was good, is good. Tonks would have all the needed skills to do what happened at Privet, and possibly keep the boy hidden away." Leaning back in his chair, the Auror refused to meet anyone's eyes, as he stared intently into the hearth. "The times involved only make it an easier match. We lack concrete evidence, but in time the DMLE thinks it'll arise."

More murmurs started at this, and Dumbledore let them, listening in to the various small conversations. Too easily two of his number had broken free or been swayed. He would not make the same mistakes, again. Tighter reins on those that gave him their loyalty, and a stronger hand upon them, was obviously needed.

Albus again gestured for silence, and this time it came, "Regardless, Harry had slipped out of the bank, before I could speak with him and convince him to return to us. I fear he has a new companion, or possibly that the two now missing could be working in collusion with one another." Into the somewhat confused silence, Dumbledore clarified his statement, "I believe Lupin was previously, or has been turned to whatever ideal Nymphadora was following."

It was a new face, a recent recruit from the Ministry, that spoke up to this, "They had begun talking more, socially, sometime before she ended up being removed from the Order."

"Their families, through Sirius I reckon, were close as well," Arthur added, looking thoughtful. "You think that Tonks and Lupin were working together to spirit Harry away? It doesn't make sense, Dumbledore. Why would Lupin do such a thing?"

Settling in his chair, the Headmaster steepled his fingers before him and looked thoughtful a moment. "I don't believe Harry to be one to plan such things as have happened. He is too young, inexperienced. He is bright, and trusting, though, in great quantities. Were familiar faces to offer him the opportunity to do something new, exciting perhaps, I believe the boy would jump at the chance.

"That said, perhaps Remus and Nymphadora are simply doing that. Offering young Harry the chance to have some fun, get out and see new things," chuckling a bit, the old wizard straitened the glasses that threatened to slip from his nose. "I sincerely hope it to be so innocent. The alternative would be a great blow not only to the Light, but the Order itself."

Minerva McGonagall shook her head slowly, clearing her throat. "Albus, you can't be insinuating that Lupin, best friend to Sirius and James, would betray Harry? James's son?"

"I am insinuating nothing, Minerva," Dumbledore countered, yet let the woman's assumption stand unchallenged in the room. "What we do know, and what the Ministry has found give us this.

"Since Harry's disappearance, Nymphadora has also gone missing. She has been in contact with no one, and was only recently seen again, and in the presence of Harry. After the Reading, she was seen with Lupin, talking and even during her escort to the Ministry, was in his presence," pausing for breath, the man shook his head sadly. "After the Reading, I placed a summons to the Order, and Lupin did not answer. Nor, did anyone see him leaving the bank. Yet those of you who accompanied me saw the odd display and Apparation that occurred outside the Ministry, and we believe Lupin was one of those two who so mysteriously left."

To a resigned room, the Headmaster made his last statement on the matter. "To this end, I believe Remus Lupin to be either helping Harry to evade us, or working with some other group to keep him separate from us, for whatever unknown purpose."

"Why would Harry want to avoid us so, Dumbledore?" Molly asked, but her usual note of worry was dulled, over the long day. The woman looked nothing less than exhausted. Those having heard the rather grim details of the reading and knowing the Weasley Matron's mind, could likely surmise the woman to have simply worried herself into such a state.

Reaching up and removing his glasses, the old wizard cleaned them with his cloak, a distant look on his face. "That I cannot tell you, Molly.

Perhaps Nymphadora has had some hand in turning him from us. Perhaps he's taken it upon himself to do something rash and thoughtless, to spare his friends from harm," shaking his head, the man looked to each one there, his naked gaze full of worry and anxiety. "Regardless the cause, we must retrieve Harry Potter. The boy's life, and I fear much more are at stake here. He is unprotected, and exposed outside of his wards and guard, and each minute outside them, is a chance for Voldemort to strike.

"We absolutely must find Harry Potter."

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"How many Apparations was that, Moony?" Leaning on his knees, Harry blinked the haze from his eyes, as his head finally seemed to solidly settle back in his skull.

Leaning his head on a tree nearby, Lupin coughed, and shrugged slightly. "Lost count, just stopped and brought us here when I started feeling too weary to continue." Turning, the Werewolf slumped and sat on the roots and grinned at the young man. "Been some time since I've had this feeling."

"Don't follow," the young man countered, voicing his confusion.

Chuckling, the Werewolf rubbed at his eyes, "That rush of intrigue, the feeling you're going against the system. How I miss the Marauders... but this is a familiar scent." His expression had gone distant, wistful at the mention of the old group of friends, but the smile remained.

Raising a brow, Harry shook off the last of the cobwebs from his mind and looked about them curiously. The landscape seemed familiar, mountains distant and rising sharply. All about them, the sounds of forest rose up and drifted about, telling him that they were far, at least further than he was familiar, from people and cities. The ground was the deep, almost cushioning bed that always rests beneath old growth, and Harry was suddenly reminded of his forays into the

Forbidden Forest. Senses of familiarity became recognition, and with eyes widening, Harry rounded on his companion, "Moony... where are we?"

Watching Harry's eyes dart about almost frantically, Lupin hid a moment's amusement at the young man's anxiety. "Oh don't worry, Harry. Nothing dangerous here." Lupin smirked when Harry visibly relaxed, and decided to make the young man squirm a bit, "well, unless you count the errant hellhound and the Acromantulas."

Sputtering, Harry seemed struck a moment, "Are you mad? We're in the Forest?" Jumping to his feet, Harry looked all about himself and drew a wand, black and gray, that Lupin had not seen before. "What are you sitting for, let's get out of here!"

Rising, Lupin placed a hand on Harry's arm, only to have it shrugged free angrily, "Relax, we're on the outskirts, beside Hogsmeade. Too close to people for any of the truly dangerous things to be wandering."

Sparing the Werewolf a stern look, Harry sheathed his wand and looked about him warily. "Why here, though? Isn't this a bit close to Hogwarts and Dumbledore?"

"Best place to hide, Cub, is in plain sight. We'll head over to the Shrieking Shack and plan what to do about the Ministry," striding off, he gestured for Harry to follow, and shortly the two were skirting the town by means of the Forest, avoiding the dangers of both.

Harry kept his eyes to the darkness of the Forest, the lighter edges by the bustling and bright town lost to his eyes. They walked, quietly and easily through the mould, the younger man following in Lupin's sure steps. It wasn't long till they made the way to the thinning trees by the hut that Hagrid kept, and the two settled behind some of the larger trunks to gaze about, making sure they'd not trip over the largish man in their walking. Five minutes or so wait, where Harry guiltily stole a few tomatoes from the grounds keeper's garden, and they finally heard Hagrid mumbling to Fang about something from inside. Continuing the final leg, they made it to the Willow just in time for sunset.

"This damned tree only seems to like dealing with me," Lupin muttered, inching forward with a long branch he'd picked up in hand. Above them, Harry watched the tree's boughs and limbs shuffling fitfully, as if wary and waiting for someone to stray too close. As he watched, Lupin struck a single knot in the trunk with the branch, and the great violent Willow went silent, as if stunned. Motioning Harry forward, the two stole into the passage beneath the great tree's roots and made their way to the basement of the Shack.

Ignoring the dust and cobwebs, the two settled in the simple basement of the place, righting some boxes and using them for chairs. Lupin set a light in an old oil lamp and the thing sputtered fitful and smoky but gave them some light. "Alright, first things first now that we're somewhere safe... what the hell has been going on recently?"

"Excuse me?" Harry stared at Remus as the Werewolf ran a hand through his graying hair, staring intently at the young wizard. Harry looked back at the man and felt at a loss suddenly, off balance from the abrupt question.

Snorting, then sneezing rather suddenly from the dust, Lupin glared about him and finally settled his gaze back on Harry. "Do you really need me to ask for details? I think you know well enough what I mean, Harry. What have you and Tonks been doing, these last weeks?"

"Lupin, this really isn't helping us get Tonks free you know-" Harry cut off as he saw the look on the Werewolf's face, and sighed. "Look, it's a long story, and I'd rather spend the time working on freeing Tonks, not telling tales. Is there no way I can put this off till later?"

Lupin stood and paced about in the darkened room slowly, and Harry watched, noting how the man seemed to know where loose boards, low beams and odd things were without thinking. "To be honest Harry? It's that question that kept me from sending you back to the Order. Something about how you and Tonks were acting today, just didn't set right with what we've been lead to believe." Leaning against a musty and peeling wall, the former professor regarded Harry and his anxious expression. "Listen, Harry. Nothing short of you telling me

that you've gone off to help You-Know-Who would change my opinion of you, alright?"

Leaning back against the wall himself, Harry thought back to what had been going on, and what he could and could not, based on the Geis tell the man regardless. "Things had gone on, last year around the time after the Ministry fight, around losing Sirius.

"I lost my faith, Lupin. It was all just too much finally," Harry pulled off his glasses and leaned his head back, knocking some small dust, ignored, onto his face. "All the Headmaster's plans, the Prophecy, the summers spent in that place." Cracking an eye at Lupin, he only saw the vague shape of the man in the blurry darkness. "I could have grown as any other wizarding child, with friends, and a knowledge of my place in the world. But no. And with no reasons, other than some assurance it was 'best' and 'for the greater good'," sneering, Harry rolled his eyes and slipped his glasses back on. "What else do you need?"

Heaving a great sigh, Lupin looked away from the son of one of his best friends, guilt welling up in his chest. "I don't need anything, Harry. Not from you," shaking his head, the man stood and crossed the room, settling on the wall near Harry. "What I mean to say, is I owe you a great deal, but unlike Dumbledore I'm not going to assume what's best for you. What I do need, is anything that can help me, to help you. What can you tell me in this vein Harry? About what happened this summer and where you've been?"

Looking thoughtful a moment, Harry nodded, watching the Werewolf intently, "We left, after I decided not to deal with being lead, manipulated any longer. After that, I... studied. Spent some time doing research on a few things. After that, it was work on the Will and my own freedom, making sure all went as Sirius had planned, and that I had a way to learn and train myself." Shaking his head, but meeting the Werewolf's eyes, he added with a note of finality, "beyond that, I really can't say. If you have something specific to ask, I may answer. May."

"Right..." sighing, the man ran a hand over his face wearily, his eyes resting on Harry's robe, the sleeve where he'd seen the young man stow that wand. "Your wand. You pulled it when we arrived in the Forest." He watched Harry unconsciously look to his arm, where Lupin had to assume he'd have a holster for the thing, beneath his robes. "Now, I remember your wand, Harry. I saw a great deal of it when I taught here. That wasn't the one I remember."

Resignedly, Harry pulled the wand free, and held it by the midpoint for Lupin to see briefly. When the man's eyes widened slightly at the detail and unusual crafting, he stowed it again. "It was made specifically for me. Supposedly, that means it may work better than my old one, but until tomorrow I don't chance to compare them. Admittedly, what I did study on wands in the brief time I was able, said as much."

Brows knitted in thought, Lupin recalled what he knew about wands, but found the information lacking. "Are you sure you can trust the source, Harry? As nice as it is to be free of all the restrictions on magic and minors, what if there's something worse on that wand? A curse or something like it?"

"Considering the source, I'd trust them with my life," the young wizard said resolutely, and Lupin let that argument drop, before he raised Harry's anger.

"What else have you been up to? What kept you from contacting us, while you were away?"

Laughing quietly, Harry shook his head and stood, pacing slowly about the debris strewn around the floor. "To be honest, the reason I hadn't contacted the Order, was the Order." When Lupin didn't immediately ask what he meant, or why he was off endangering himself or some other such common responses he'd expected, Harry grinned, "I was rather enjoying not feeling caged. Working on things that felt worthwhile, and making progress, small as it was."

At this Lupin went silent, nodding slightly as if in thought. Progress Harry had said... and that was the crux of the Werewolf's own concerns. Grayback's packs were resolute – no manner of talk or

reason at this point would sway them. They were killers given the guise of a beast, and the hearts of them as well. Such people, if Lupin could use the word for them, felt nothing about those they attacked turned or killed. Only the hunt, the blood, and the feast. He despaired when Dumbledore had initially sent him to spy and seek who would turn against the Alpha Grayback, but it was a fruitless effort. The few in the pack like Lupin, who fought against his own change, were culled and cast off, often set out or upon during that change as a hunt themselves.

The Packs had no use for weakness. Spying was less successful, as it seemed the hunts were random, more spur of the moment events that simply happened on a whim. The only real directed force was Grayback himself, who often sought out and attacked prominent wealthy wizarding families and their children, to turn or kill.

Seizing on the one thread he could, Lupin asked what he knew would likely be a pointless question, "You speak of progress Harry, what do you mean?"

"Maybe in time, Moony. After we get Tonks back, if you're still inclined to keep our company, perhaps then," Harry smirked, stretching tiredly in the rising afternoon. They'd been an hour or more getting to the shack, and about as long talking and going on. Harry was beginning to worry for Tonks, and the situation behind her arrest. If it were someone close to him, someone in the Order or Dumbledore that had tipped off or convinced the Ministry, then it had to have been before the Reading. Depending on who... their goals may accelerate after Harry's actions. "Now, how are we going to do that? You seemed to have a plan."

"I do, but first... do you have your father's cloak?" At Harry's nod, Lupin motioned for him to put it on. Unpacking the thing from his still-shrunken trunks took a moment, but within a minute, Harry was settled under it, curiously. Nodding, Lupin moved back to the tunnel, leading away to the Willow. "Yes, there is a plan, though it will be difficult to put in place. The normal Ministry offices, to appeal and question arrests aren't staffed after evening, which puts us at a disadvantage. When they took her, it was already after then, so we had no chance tonight to free her." Apparently staring out into the

darkness of the underground path, he grinned suddenly. "Ah, here we are."

And Harry was only kept where he sat, by the shock of seeing Severus Snape enter and cast a wary eye about the room. "I see you're normal taste in accommodations has not changed, Lupin." Pursing his lips, the man pulled his pitch colored cloak about him more tightly, as if to ward off the very dust that was disturbed by his passing.

"Well, can't have the rats going off and finding better housing, who knows what tales they tell," the Werewolf countered, and smiled tightly at the potions-master. "Speaking of rats, how fares my old... friend?"

"Not as well as he wishes, I'm sure," the dark-eyed man replied briefly, expression darkening considerably. "Loyalty has it's own costs. Being close to the Dark Lord only ensures you are first to feel his wrath. The only one excused from this is the Lestrangle woman, and that only due to her... instability."

Remus's eyes narrowed at the mention of the former Black sister, and his lip curled up in an unconscious snarl, "Instability or no, that woman needs to be put down. She's done too much damage, perhaps your 'Lord' would do well to practice a bit of forward thinking, and reward his servants equally."

Shaking his head, Snape's lank hair fell before his face, and Harry only then noticed how weary the man seemed. "I would not presume to tell him anything he didn't first ask for. As for Bellatrix, her madness seems to have stemmed from Azkaban," looking about the room, Severus seemed to search for something, a curious light in his eyes. "Normally, at this time of month you sit here in the dark, bemoaning your fate. Why the light, Lupin?"

"Ah, forgive me, I forget your eyes are so accustomed to your dungeon," smirking faintly, Lupin extinguished the lamp with a wand flick. "So, what news from the Order?"

"Only late, from me. I was unable to meet with the Order itself, as prior... situations required my attentions. The Dark Lord still suffers, his mind unsettled from the event at the Ministry. The loss of the Prophecy was a rather steep moral blow to the ranks, as was losing most of the inner circle and the Dark Lord's apparent... defeat, " reaching within his cloak, Snape pulled free a bottle of bluish-silver liquid, handing it to the Werewolf with a jerky snap of his hand. "Sadly, I cannot linger to discuss such with you. Not that you'll shortly be much for conversation."

At Lupin's laughing, Harry's eyes went wide. The man's eyes were glinting a faint amber, even in this low light. "Ah, ever with that sharp wit. So no real news then?"

Sneering, an expression seemingly at home on the man's features, Snape turned as if to leave, "I would be wary, from here Lupin. I think Dumbledore may be counting you a traitor now as well. I will speak on your behalf this time, as perhaps the old man has forgotten your particular... situation." Glaring about into the dark room once more, the potions Professor's dark eyes seemed fit to pierce Harry's cloak, and he schooled himself to silence, trying even to quiet his heartbeat. "Be that as it may, if you see Potter, as the Headmaster seems to allude the rash youth to be with you now, pass him this message. Dumbledore grows desperate. Potter would do well, for the sake of those close to him, to return and see to their well-being." With those words, seeming spoken to the room and not the Werewolf, Snape spun about and with a flare of his cloak sped from the basement room.

Harry waited a handful of moments, before pulling his own cloak free and staring in shock at the man, the Werewolf just meters from him, "What were you thinking, bringing me here on the full moon, Lupin? What are you playing at, and how are you to help me, if the moon's to be full tonight?"

"Part of the plan Harry," Lupin's eyes, growing more and more amber in the darkness as time passed, seemed to glint hungrily at the young man. "Snape has been good enough to keep me in Wolfsbane these many months, but tonight I'm going to do without. Or rather, I'll manage it, just too late.

"We're going to Ministry, Harry. I'm your distraction, and you're to get Tonks," with a slight laugh, Lupin looked over at the Wolfsbane and Harry could see the sadness, now, in his eyes. "How I hate these days. Yet the convenience tonight is just too great."

Shaking his head, disbelieving in what he was hearing, Harry stood and stowed his cloak in his belt. "Lupin, you can't be serious. They'll arrest – possibly kill you if you're caught out changed tonight. How is this going to help?"

"Simply? I'm going to go for a walk nearby the Ministry itself, under the potion and with my wits about me, while you slip in through the distraction and find some way to fix this."

Blinking for a few moments, Harry laughed and crossed his arms, pacing. "You're mad, you know? What am I going to do – waltz in there, change the arrest orders in the DMLE, break out Tonks and slip us both out?" Lupin's slow smile was his only answer. "No! That's insane!"

"Can you think of a better plan, Harry?"

Scrubbing his hand through his hair, Harry groaned and banged his head into the wall, leaning against it. "Damn it, Lupin. We can wait for tomorrow at this and just-"

Lupin shook his head, and pulled his cloak about him tightly, "No. Tomorrow, things will be in place, to prepare for you. I've given it thought, and likely there will be a marathon trial much like your own last year, to get her tossed to Azkaban. If nothing else, the trap will be set. Perhaps it's paranoia, perhaps just insight, but I feel that there's more to this than we're seeing. Tonight, we have a chance to slip in before the traps is laid."

Harry rounded on the Werewolf and held his disquieting gaze solidly, "Why? Why are you helping like this? Why are you suddenly placing yourself in harm's way for Tonks?"

At Harry's words, Lupin's expression clouded and he turned away, hands flexing, empty. "Sometimes, Harry, it's best to not question the generosity you receive. Unless you can puzzle out a better plan, then this is our way. And I need to be off soon, or my ploy will be a loss."

"Damnit! Fine, but know I'm doing this under protest."

"Funny, I said as much for half of your father's schemes."

Chuckling, Lupin shrugged off the blow Harry landed on his arm, but the two made the fast trip back through the tunnel, and beyond the Willow's reach. Setting a brisk jog, they passed the way back to the Forest, and what was apparently Lupin's preferred Apparation point. "So you had this all planned, since the bank then?"

Nodding, Lupin favored the young man with a slight grin, "I was a Marauder in more than just name, even if most of the plans weren't my own."

The night was quickly falling, as they found the small clearing in the Forest. Lupin looked about anxiously, pulling at his robes occasionally as if they itched. "Soon... we have to get going," pulling his wand, the Werewolf did a small charm to warn him of anyone nearby, and nodded. "We can leave now, put on your cloak and cast a silencing charm on yourself. I'll drop you by the Ministry Apparation point, near the Atrium hearths. I'll check in with Munch to get the news, and then be off." Checking his own pockets briefly, Lupin nodded and took a bracing breath. "Ready?"

"Bloody daft plan... and yes," Harry grated, more nervous than during the Yule Ball dance in his fourth year. With that, the two were off, Harry's last look at Lupin's face, grinning, for all the world looking like his usually careworn and friendly expression had suddenly grown too many teeth and a pair of glowing embers for eyes.

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Very little improved the impression one got, from inside one of the holding cells within the Ministry. Tonks looked about her spartan cell, and schooled her face to impassiveness. She'd been inside these chambers, dropping off and retrieving prisoners as her career dictated, but never had she been closed up in one before. They certainly didn't exude a sense of comfort.

Two and a half meters square, the room was a simple box with little more than a flat cot, an Ever-full bowl for water, and a Vanishing one for relieving herself. The door and walls weren't barred, so much as reinforced stone and steel. The door and it's wall were enchanted to go transparent on command, usually before it was opened so a prisoner had no way to hide and surprise their captors. It was on the cot, laying with her eyes closed that Tonks found herself that night, fitful and running the afternoon's events through her mind.

She'd not bothered to argue with the Aurors enforcing the charge, knowing that the Statute of Limitations, a series of rules for the time allowed after a crime for it to be charged, were still in effect. Not only that, but the actual time at which Harry no longer counted as a minor was tomorrow – and today that did her no good.

Tonks knew better than to expect a normal, fair trial. Whatever forces were at work in this, they were aligned against her. Recalling Harry's trial the year before after the Dementor attack, the young witch began planning.

A threat of a snapped wand meant little to her, as like Harry, she could simply get another. What worried her, was the likely sentence to Azkaban that would be tacked on to her. Remembering what had normally befall Dumbledore's enemies, she chewed at her lip faintly.

Harry's public image had done a full about-face since the appearance of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in the Ministry during the battle there. The public remembered his original role in the Dark Lord's first defeat, and now seemed to be trying, by glowing editorial and much retraction, to gain the Boy-Who-Lived's good will. Even the Prophet's rather scathing and critical views on Harry were softening, with the threat of the Dark Lord's war again on the horizon.

With all the positive press flying about, she knew the time was right for a scapegoat to be raked along the coals. Someone who could be publicly condemned and used to draw the poison away from the press's mistaken viewpoints. It would also, in Scrimgeour's case, present a solid stance and memorable case for his own climb to power, with Fudge's imminent sacking. Grimacing, Tonks realized she'd picked the wrong time to be stepping on so many toes.

What amused her more than anything was that same drastic turnabout in public opinion. Suddenly, Harry was again the Boy-Who-Lived, not the Boy-Who-Lies, but was there apology made to him? No, of course not. Recriminations, blame-laying. Fudge was even more demonized, as the papers all scrambled to point their fingers at him as the reason for their harsh treatment, and sometimes outright lies. Even common people were swayed, seemingly by the winds on this. Before the Ministry battle, she could remember the street chatter in Diagon, so much of it idle noise littered with the odd snide comment on Harry's character.

Now it was as if he'd only a year ago vanquished You-Know-Who for the first time. People remembered who, if not how, it was that their fear was removed the first time. Now they seemed to recall this same slandered boy was the reason, and with that fear now very real, their tune changes as if set by the wind. Sadly for them, it seemed Harry's own ideals and loyalties were not so flighty. He really did seem to have the patience of a saint, she mused, thinking how she would have reacted to all the bad press, lies, refusals and focused slander tactics.

Tonks grinned, stretching and rubbing at her eyes tiredly. It had to have been a few hours since she was settled into the holding cell, making it some time in the night. Lupin had said tonight he'd be out at the Shack, meaning it was still a full moon out... so there were likely to be quite a few Aurors and some office personnel on mandatory overtime notice. She had no way to check and see if there were anyone near her cell, but since she wasn't considered high-risk or a danger to herself or anyone, the cell was the standard, no-frill-box-with-a-lock variety. Smirking a bit, she settled on her cot and cleared her mind.

She wasn't the best Occlumens, but there was rudimentary training for all Aurors in that area. Brass had felt it a good skill and exercise to keep focus and distraction from affecting performance, and also seemed to help with the mental strain of what they did. After the increasing Death Eater attacks since the spring of '95, she'd needed it more than ever. Some of the crime scenes had been rather gruesome.

A short while later, she'd found the necessary balance of mind and focus and with only a brief moment's hesitation swung her arm at the cell door, murmuring the opening charm she's heard the Auror that brought her here use.

With a satisfying noise of a bolt releasing, the door settled on its weight and swung open very slightly. "Well Harry, seems you're not the only one who picked up a trick or two this summer," she quipped, leaning close to the door and listening for any hint that her spell had been noticed. She heard none, and focusing again cast a Disillusioning and silencing charm on herself, feeling the odd strain behind her eyes the use of wandless magic was causing. It bothered her how easily Harry could do this, but she somewhat understood why. The book had said it plainly, if more technically – the more you use a wand, the more difficult it became to go without. Harry, with only a few years behind him doing so, was easier to break of the habit. Vowing to work on the skills that were obviously saving her hide from Azkaban, the young Auror let the door open enough to creep out, and settled back into a shadow. Easing the cell door shut, she sealed it with a simple colloportus, and inspected the small hallway.

There were a dozen cells in this area, along this hall. Further down, she knew there would be the watch station for this block and two guards. Beyond that, the DMLE processing and holding room, where her wand was in lockup, and then beyond that the Ministry proper. From there out, she may as well be outside in the fresh air.

The trick would be to get the cell block guards to move away from the desk, so he couldn't alert the holding room, or subdue them before. She'd also need to drop her charms, the Disillusioning and silencing ones, before passing the doorway, as all the holding cell block portals

were proof versus such magics. Normally, such a thing would be disastrous for a breakout like she was attempting, but as a Metamorph, that wouldn't be a problem.

Settling her nerve, the former Auror crept to the corner of the hall and knelt down, peering around at the desk briefly. One guard. Ducking back around she grinned, thanking whoever was tending her luck for full moons and spare staffing.

Making sure her Disillusioning charm was still set, she once more set around the corner, and against the far wall. She hoped any shimmer left from her charm would be masked by the desk, and leaving any details to that hope, moved up to stand beside the man who was blearily reading a copy of Quidditch Weekly Report. Tucking her hand behind the man's neck, she loosed a breath and slammed his face down into the desk once, hard.

Catching his weight, she settled the unconscious man to the floor and searched out his wand, tucking it into her robe. Once she'd memorized his face and remembered which one of her former colleagues he was, she used the borrowed wand to levitate the fallen guard to her cell, locking the man inside. Checking the time with the wand, she noted it was half an hour to shift change. Knowing the cells were soundproof, she nodded and settled in for thirty minutes of light reading.

Twenty five minutes later, she started and drawled a greeting to her shift relief as the door banged open behind her. Passing off the magazine and mentioning an article on a local team on her way out the door, Tonks waved to the holding room staff, checking in with the duty officer desk.

"Afternoon Dawlish, anything interesting to read in lockup today? Got a double on patrol out in the docks," lazing on the desk, she picked at a tooth, a particular habit that the Auror who's face she was borrowing had. Nodding behind himself, the duty officer waved Tonks on, and she smirked her thanks. "Anything interesting happening topside?"

"Nothing much," Dawlish replied, but did turn, causing Tonks to swear under her breath. "Hear there's a changer up, maybe a block out. They called half the on-call's up. Seems he's a real tricky one." Something about the man's words made a chill run down her spine, and she hid it with a chuckle.

Grinning, she shrugged and pulled open another locker, seeing the various items she'd brought in, arrayed on a tray. "Poor sod, in for a headache come morning then. Hope none of ours gets the scratch," she mumbled, and seeing the man turn back. She made great pretense of looking over the book she'd had on her, and palmed the various trunks around it. Last, she slipped her hand up, letting the wand snap loose of its hook and fall into the loose sleeve of her robe. "Alright, nothing good here, but this will do. Better than watching the tide though, so may as well check it out."

Dawlish gave Tonks an odd look and shrugged, "eh, whatever. Just have it back by end of shift."

All her possessions back in possession, the Metamorph walked out into the hall, and summoned a lift. She was tempted to see who's idea throwing her in a box was, but decided it better to just escape and worry about the details later. When the lift stopped, she darted around a corner and slammed into something, causing her to fall sideways and lay, stars in her vision inside the lift.

By her feet, half covered in his Invisibility cloak, was Harry. Tonks slapped her hand across the controls and the lift shuddered back to life, sending them down the way to the Atrium when she rounded on the young wizard. "Harry! What the hell are you doing here?" Hissing her words, she stood and worked to right her robes.

Blinking at Tonks in confusion, he suddenly seemed to gather his wits and pulled the wand from his wrist. Tonks quickly shifted her face, and ducked to the side as a half-formed spell snapped by her cheek. "Tonks! What-"

Hushing him, she pointed to the floor display and stole to his side, giving him a warm hug. Somewhat stunned by the sudden move, he

had barely returned the gesture when she shook her head hard and resettled her appearance, "I asked first. What are you doing here?"

Resettling his cloak and pulling up the hood, he slid in behind the young witch, as she settled herself near the door, looking bored. "Well, I'll give you the detailed version later, when we have time. Lupin's up on the street, playing at a distraction. I snuck into records, and pulled the arrest order and report – for all practical purposes, you were never arrested, and the call to do it was never made."

Impressed, Tonks favored him with a smile. "Well, I'm glad you didn't try to come break me out of my cell, those doorways kill illusions," she murmured, and heard Harry's nervous laugh in response. "Bugger, you would have. Fine sight that would have been."

"Let's just leave, I want to get out of this dreadful place," voice low, Harry regardless sounded rather worn. The lift stopped finally, and before them was the small hallway, and the single facing door to the Atrium. Looking behind her, Tonks nodded and pulled it open.

The sight that met them almost had Harry breaking his cover. The Atrium was empty, except for the visitor's desk and the occasional floo in our out. Eager to be gone, Harry paced Tonks as she mimed the walk of her assumed identity and the two were nearly at the Apparation point, when the desk phone rang. Stifling a groan, Harry stopped along with Tonks, and a voice called for her, or rather her borrowed face's, attention.

"Hey! Head up top, all free hands are to search for that changer on the loose up there," Munch, still on duty, called after her. Waving back an affirmative, she took a double-handful of floo powder, and hoping Harry hadn't wandered off, quietly called out a surprising destination.

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," she told the fire, and waiting for the flash of green signaling Harry's departure, stepped in herself.

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After Lupin had dropped off Harry, he'd promptly Apparated to the streets above, and set to walking about, as if strolling in the evening air.

Despite his anxiety he'd been assured, and had proof, that if he took the Wolfsbane potion very close to the change, that he'd be unable to infect anyone. This more than the fear of getting caught or injured, worried the Werewolf. He'd not think twice about causing a grand disruption, if it meant Harry having the time to perform his task in decent conditions, but inflicting the Change on anyone else... unthinkable.

So, taking out the vial of vile potion, he set off toward the pubs, and started whistling a jaunty tune. He wasn't three bars in when the clouds parted and like a lance into his skull, the first rays of moonlight hit him square pain had nearly blinded and struck him dumb where he stood, but his conscience wouldn't let him give in and shut out the agony, not yet. Wincing, gasping as molten pins felt like they were erupting from his very bones, Lupin ripped the stopper free from the vial and poured the horrid potion down his throat, all the while saying a silent prayer this change would not steal his mind, and his body.

Lupin staggered, leaning on a light post as the few bystanders gave him room. Some muggles and wizards made up this crowd, and he quietly laughed at his choice of neighborhood, as the tide of late night revelers broke around him. The pain abated for a few moments, and he took them to look about himself, try to find something, somewhere he could go that would be less dangerous.

The effort would be wasted. As if a dam had broken, the Change hit him all the harder, seeming to tear it's way up and through the numbing potion. Clutching at his head, the former professor screamed out into the night, and the note wavered as it took on a howling quality.

Minutes later, the night erupted in screams and calls for help, as impossibly, a Werewolf was loosed on London.

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A/N: Yes, it was a full moon that day. Check your calendars.

Some time spent building foundations in ch7, so forgive the slower pace. I took three days or so for personal time and to see Dark Knight. Lovely movie!

Revisions to previous, correcting some spelling and naming issues. Bipolar spellchecker properly slapped about. I think. Back to my regular update frequency.

Chapter Nine.

Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend.

– Albert Camus

The chase had him thrilled, to his core. Sounds of feet pounding at the streets and road behind and around him ripped a laugh from his throat, and the sound pealed about the high walls of the alley like a gunshot.

Lupin sped down another narrow way, and ducked below the lee of a subway entrance, hiding behind the back of the thing's guardrail. Pursuit, this time Aurors rather than London police, ran out of the street he'd just left and stood, pointing and shouting. Crouching low, the Werewolf crept out, behind a small car and lined himself up with his prey.

"Can't have gotten far, maybe the subway?" An Auror hazarded, glancing about himself warily. For whatever reason, this changer wasn't the sort the usual Werewolf Capture Unit was used to dealing with, and it was upsetting their plans terribly.

A younger recruit, not used to the typical behavior of changers over long years working with them, seemed to consider the area more closely. "This isn't right. Listen, we've been having people scream and shout all night as this beast passed. Now? Nothing."

His fellows agreed, and they took a defensive formation, but were a moment late in closing it. Lupin, still quite in control of himself thanks to the potion, lunged forward and was up to a full sprint before the first Auror noticed him. Striking the three much like a bowling ball against its pins, the wizards went careening and flailing in all directions, two knocked unconscious from the impact, and the other left in no shape to continue the chase.

Whimpering, the man scrounged everywhere for his glasses, quite blind without them. He'd also had his wand knocked free, and it was only shock and the impact itself that kept him from panicking and screaming. Scuffling about in the alley, he bumped into something

large and solid, and froze. Looking up slowly, he could only faintly make out a large gray form, and the two points of amber light that were framed within. Hiccuping in fright, the man held out a hand to ward off what he knew would come.

Instead he started, his glasses falling into the outstretched hand. Blinking rapidly in confusion, the man did what anyone would at that point. Murmuring his thanks, he placed them on his face, and looked back up at the seemingly amused gaze of a Werewolf. Wisely, he decided to join his fellows in their less than lucid state.

Laughing again at the sport he was having, Lupin bounded off toward the north, and set course for particular park often frequented by a number of people this time of night. Harry was likely long gone from the Ministry, if he were successful. If not... well that was worry for tomorrow. Tonight... there was so much tonight left to have.

Howling into the clear, cool air he bounded out into the busy street, dodging trolleys and a scooter, all careening away from him in fright. The smile he wore was lost on those that could see it, but Lupin didn't mind.

It was a lovely night to be out.

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The unpleasant darkness swelled and surged about, contained uneasily within the old, decrepit walls. Decrepit, because the Lord of the house cared little for it – it's care, it's condition, the very existence of the thing. It was a reminder of his fault, his failure and inadequacy. Faults he had erased, scrubbed the record's ink clean with blood.

"Lord, the arrangements are made."

Voldemort looked to his servant, one of many, and acknowledged it with a lingering glance. A moment passed and the Dark Lord, as he was when the servant arrived, was still, contemplative. The once-bright wood paneling of the wall had blackened and warped, long

before the withering gaze leveled on it, and the recently inducted Death Eater wondered curiously what was so engaging, in that musty corner. "The players have been tapped," the statement, less a question as an affirmation of his will, was hissed quietly into the still air, and startled the cloaked figure.

"Yes, Lord. Those you listed have been shadowed and placed under Imperius."

If one were to be close, intimately close to the man whose face seemed a skull floating in that darkness, much as his mark was often placed in the sky, they'd see a smile. It was a humorless thing, faint and chilling. "And they understand the task at hand? The part their pawns are to play?"

Looking dreadfully uncomfortable, the servant bowed and turned to leave, mumbling a faint affirmation to the question. "It will be done."

No acknowledgment greeted the servant's words. Voldemort's eyes did not track its exit, as the skeletally pale man seemed content to stare off, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"If I may ask one question, Lord?"

Blood-colored eyes turned and pierced the dank air. "A question?" A face that looked uncomfortable in its own shape tilted, regarded the figure by the door to his chamber. "I hazard that you would not be so foolish as to question my will."

Quaking visibly, the cloaked figure dropped to its knees and held shaking hands up, warding off the comment in the near lightless room. "No! No of course not Lord. I... seek understanding."

"Your loyalty does not require understanding. Only obedience."

"Forgive me, Lord." The figure moved to turn, but stopped short as Voldemort snapped his hand out, clenching it as if to catch an errant insect that crossed his vision. The cold smile was in place, terrible to see for the masked figure, as he drawn close by force of the Dark Lord's will. "Speak your question. I find myself curious. Perhaps you

shall assist in removing such questions in those others who serve with the answers you receive."

Swallowing a knot that seemed to tie itself into the figure's throat, a voice wavered faintly from the mask, shaking as hard as the hands held out before it. "Only why you send your own to Azkaban, Lord. I only wonder why, when you could ensure they go free."

Voldemort laughed, but the mirth never spread to his eyes. "I shall trump your one question, with three answers," the Dark Lord whispered, fingers flexing like pale, restless spiders. "Punishment," he hissed sibilantly. "For failure, within the Ministry. Regardless their sentences are planned... The shadows that haunt Azkaban will feed on them, take of their will and soul. My will. My soul." Smirking, the man rose and the hand he held out clenched, relaxed slowly. The cloaked servant gasped, regaining his lost wind. "They serve. That is why they go to the Shrouded Isle.

"There is your first answer." At these words, another Death Eater entered the room, slipping quietly to the side of the now-prone messenger, and taking the figure by the back of the neck, keeping their head bowed. Smiling wider, Voldemort turned and incanted fire into the hearth, painting the room in dancing shadows and crimson slashes of light. "They serve, without question, much like my dear Bellatrix. Your second gift, insight into my will is this – to instill hope. An illusion of security."

Eyes shifting about warily, the servant tried to raise it's head to watch the Dark Lord speak, but the hand at it's neck and a pressure in the air itself kept it bowed. "Lord, I don't understand."

Crossing suddenly to the door, Voldemort gestured for the slight form of Bellatrix, and the cloaked woman released the Death Eater's neck. "Of course not, you simple fool, such plans are beyond your need to be told. Sadly, your true master will never hear these words... which I'm sure they would pay dearly for." In a panic, the cloaked figure stood and pulled a wand, only to have that arm cut down with a spell from the Death Eater, standing by Voldemort's side. Whimpering, the figure grasped at the bleeding remnant of it's arm, kneeling in pain.

"Of course you do not understand." Crossing about to stand before the hearth, the image of Voldemort, standing before a great flaming maw of the hearth reflected in the mask the Death Eater wore. "Do you understand terror, now? You and your masters, you have so much, within you. So much joy, and hope and promise – but terror? Fools!" Stalking about the room, the skeletal visage seemed to dart about in it's musing, the words it spoke now less to the servant bowed with his will.

"Until you lose something precious, until you sit on that edge and see it bleeding to death in your hands, see hope, it's bones broken and shining in the light from fires eating at your dreams, you'll never know terror." Smirking, the man moved to the fallen spy's side, picking up and inspecting the raw bone that jutted from the figure's severed arm. "...But you must have hope, for it to be stolen away."

"Curious is it not? Were I to strike now, my force, my will would waste away in attrition. My hands, eyes and ears, my Knights would beat themselves bloody and useless on the resolve of those Blood-Traitors. No. This will not be the way." The Dark Lord clenched his hand, and the sound of bone cracking was loud in the room, "I will break them, and there will be no fight. No war. No rebellion of ideas and contest of will. No contest to my will.

"Terror is chaos. Lack of knowledge, that you have any idea what happens next. I'll not kill them, because I need them, those simple, ignorant sheep – but I will break them. Undo their safe, secure world, from the inside out.

"What happened before was a war. Orderly, sane and proper. Two sides, fighting, dying and vying. Not this time," he hissed, meeting the bleeding spy's eyes behind the mask.

"They, the Ministry, the Order want a war with me. But I won't meet on those fields. Won't pit my army against their's. I'll instead..." Plucking the wand from the the floor, he tossed it to Bellatrix with a nod, and the woman tucked it into her robe. "Send their trusted, to strike at the soul of their society. Have teachers burn down the schools, take the hospitals, and kill the doctors, leaving the sick and wounded on the doorsteps of their beloved. I'll turn the aged into

shields and throw their arrow-ridden bodies from catapults. Their wives and infants I'll wrap in oiled cloth and send, a burning brand against the homes of those that stand against me. I will undo, unmake. Tear apart each part of their orderly, safe world.

"And all I'll need to do, is walk in after." Stilling in his tirade, the Dark Lord chuckled, eyes slitted and regarding the false minion distantly in it's pain. "The second answer. Hope. So I can break it, more completely. Let them think their justice is done, as they step into my trap.

"Now, for the third answer," caressing his wand, the smooth, unnatural face seemed to shine with anticipation in the flame's light in the darkened room. "A lesson, in obedience, for others who would question my will.

"A lesson, in your mistake. You bear my mark, of course, despite being false." The final statement was as much a statement as demand, knowing the answer already. "Through it, you also bear my will. My strength, and with it, a sign of your obedience." Striding forward, the man's spidery hands gripped the servant's neck with uncanny strength. A manic giggle escaped the woman nearby, and through it's weakness from fear and loss of blood, the spy flailed uselessly. Dragging the gasping body from the room, Voldemort walked casually down the stairwell, to the great room of the manor. With a thought, he sent a summons to the Marked. They came, of course. Now, none would dare do else. "See, tonight the answer to a question, my servants. My Knights," his voice shuddered along the walls, less an echo in the large room as an unnaturally clear whisper. Voldemort strode into their midst, the throng parting before him, ranging about him in a distant circle as he bodily swinging about one of their own by the neck as it struggled and writhed. "Obedience requires no answers. You serve, because the alternative is death.

"Questioning, is not obedience. Therefore, you have your final answer, do you not?" Holding the cloaked figure up to his face, the Dark Lord smiled widely, and threw it from his presence with crushing force.

"Death." He merely spoke the word. His will, burned into the skin on the servant's arm carried out the intent, the purpose. There was no fight, no spell, no flash of green. Those who stood, did so straiter, more still. The lifeless mass, black shrouded and masked in its anonymity lay forgotten on the floor as Voldemort strode back to his contemplations, followed closely by the pealing, mad laughter of Bellatrix. "Be wary, what you ask for, my Knights."

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"Ah, Percy. I take it you have news?"

There were precious few, a very small number of wizards that really called the Ministry home. Most assumed that when it fell outside banker's hours, only the night shift at the DMLE were still on staff, as well as security.

That was normally true, for those that didn't take their jobs, and work as seriously as some. "Of course, it was left just as you instructed, Minister."

"Not yet. Soon, but not yet." Tawny eyes peered out from behind wired rim glasses at the small clutter of forms upon a desk. Neat, orderly, and precise, it mirrored the world Rufus Scrimgeour had striven for. "Tomorrow's Wizengamot trial will be difficult. Do we have our witnesses, to make sure things go as planned?"

Nervously the executive assistant, truthfully employed Cornelius Fudge and not the head of the Auror Division, checked over his itinerary and notations briefly. "Yes, three who were present, and two Aurors."

Rufus Scrimgeour's hand reached out, and shifted a small piece of paper slightly on his desk. "The Death Eaters from the Ministry battle will be veiled, or sentenced to life in Azkaban then. I've the proper cases and references to ensure it, provided they simply tell us everything we expect. We'd do well to have Potter there. The... swaying power of his presence would be impressive." Steepling his

fingers, the man leaned his chin against his thumbs, staring unseeing at the far wall. "There are things we must discuss, Harry and I. Something is not adding up, with his performance at the Ministry, and this recent supposed kidnapping and his appearance at the will."

"Sir, if I may... Is he really so vital?" Despite the question, the red-headed young man presented a small document.

Raising a brow, the head of the Auror division regarded Percy Weasley with a growing sense of respect. "I enjoy your ability to be open with me. Yes, yes he will be vital. A youth, barely more than a child, will soon take on the mantle of responsibility that would bow like a willow many a stronger, older man. He will be confused, unsure and ignorant of what he will, or could do, with that power. Can you imagine the chaos that would ensue, if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named managed to wrest those resources for himself?" Shaking his mane of hair, the head of the Auror Division looked to the small form Percy had handed to him. "Indeed. Indeed, well this does change things doesn't it? So the report on the kidnapping came from an internal source, and was routed through the DMLE, but quietly. No traces officially... no formal report exists then?"

Nodding, the assistant looked over his tally and nodded. "Only the copy in his possession now, record of an actual report."

"Good. Well, in the interest of progress and keeping the well oiled machine we call a government working correctly, we shall need to reproduce such a form, completed and legitimate before morning."

"Sir?"

Noting the other man's nervousness, Rufus stood and settled the heavy battle robes about himself, the red cloth rustling heavily with it's reinforced leather. "Regardless of the nature of the disappearance of the so called original forms already obviously false, dictating the Auror Division's actions against Nymphadora Tonks, there was a crime.

"I am obligated to pursue the matter to satisfaction, if not for the capture of the guilty, then the pursuit of knowledge that will lead to

the source of corruption." He looked back to the executive assistant, shifting from foot to foot nervously. "Don't worry. It'll be a formality only – but only between us. It must appear correct and legitimate, or the ruse I'm planning will be a loss."

"I... I think I understand." Sighing, the assistant produced a second formal report form, and waited as Scrimgeour spent a few moments altering it appropriately, then magically sealing the document. "Sir, is this the right thing to do?"

Scrimgeour's quill stilled, and the man's peculiar, leonine eyes met those of the assistant and held him there, immobile. "Government is a fickle thing, really. We've worked in and believed in a broken system so long, that it's machinery's death rattle is commonplace. Ignorable. But, where does it begin? Where do we look, for that sickness?" Smiling grimly, he gestured to the office.

"We need to be careful how close to the head such a thing comes, young man. Especially now. If the Ministry falls, who will step forward?"

Paling, the young man nodded nervously. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Precisely. Weakness will draw the predator. Fudge, has shown this time and again," Setting his quill, the man steeped his hands again. "No more. The right thing as you say, will be to remove the rot, cut out the cancer but leave the body whole. We will revitalize this broken machine and in it's wake, order will be left, where chaos is now. To do so, we must sometimes use parts unfamiliar. Strange medicines."

Sighing, the young man nodded his acceptance. "I understand order. But the ways to it..."

Rufus went to the man, clapping him on the shoulder. "Justice must be strong, blind and ruthless, if it is to be respected. Weakness only draws the predator. Our trap was set and sprung, and so awaits us to come and collect." Folding the form, he set it into a Ministry envelope, and laid it deliberately, slowly upon his desk. Turning to look out the enchanted windows, seeing only unremarkable night, he mused,

"We've also had the good fortune, that in one step we can now see the colors of friend and foe clearly."

Brows furrowed over the young man's glasses relayed his confusion. Smiling broadly, the gesture regardless never made it to Rufus's eyes, "Potter moved to reclaim Tonks – unless he was acting on a strong Imperius Curse. Not something I believe former Auror Tonks capable of using on Harry. It simply does not fit her profile. This leads me to think it very, very unlikely that Potter was truly kidnapped, or abducted." Moving back to his desk, the man settled in his chair and pulled one more small scrap of paper, inspecting it intently. "The question then, is why. Why go to ground, make himself impossible to find, then show up publicly at a will reading?" Grinning slightly, the man looked to his walls, seeing the many pictures there idling so late at night. "Why indeed..."

"Auror... former Auror Tonks also managed to not only release herself from custody, but evade all attempts at detection and reclaim all her possessions. Something about that sits very badly with me. I know she is a Metamorph, but this is beyond that. Perhaps the Auror Division needs cleansing," Rufus set his shoulders and leaned back into the stiff chair he preferred. "Lastly, we have proof that someone working inside the Ministry used their influence to press a charge, illegally. I want to know who, why, and how."

Slamming his hand down on the desk, Rufus grinned darkly as Percy Weasley hopped in fright. "I predicted some action to be taken, but tonight was more than I could have hoped for. The Wizengamot being up tomorrow may have spurred them, or perhaps paranoia. Merlin knows the Ministry has done nothing to gain the trust of Potter or his allies."

Shrugging uncertainly, Percy regarded his binder intently, "The government should not need the trust of someone, but simply work correctly under the power given to it."

"That is where you are wrong, Mr. Weasley," Scrimgeour countered, shaking his head. "Where does government gain that power, if not through trust? If we lose the trust of the people we serve, and make no mistake, the government is meant to serve not rule, if we lost that

trust, we become tyrants. We then move from protecting, enabling and empowering the people we look over, to restricting, removing rights, and lessening them as people," chuckling in his musing, the man reached up and rubbed at his brow, over the small glasses. "Perhaps these old ideas do not suit our world, but they suit me. The trick, Percy, is to believe in the world you live in, rather than live in the world you believe in." Rousing himself from his musing, the man regarded the seal of his office.

"Regardless, Harry has the forms, with their tracking charms. I'll find him, and get the answers I need. Perhaps I'll have some for him as well, when I meet with him." Looking back up at the somewhat shell-shocked young man, grasping to hold on to his morals in the wake of the hurricane that was about to tear the Ministry apart and rebuild it, if this man had his way. Rufus smiled again and Percy was immediately reminded of the man's phrase, on weakness and predators.

Percy swallowed and nodded very quickly, "I'll have the original order by morning, I believe there will be traces within the chain of command in the DMLE. Do you want them filed or on your desk?"

"On my desk, if you please, Percy. Depending on the wind, I may need to change my approach... honey or vinegar. I'll catch him one way or another."

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Storefronts along Diagon were long closed, and number 93 was no exception. Despite that, and the more somber and subdued tone the merchant's alley had taken in recent times, the proprietors were in residence, hard at work. To most passerby, the shop wasn't even open, the windows papered up and the door unlabeled. Even the awning was missing the usual colorful banner that proclaimed a name.

There wasn't even a sign yet.

Fred and George Weasley were testing out a few of their more curious items, when their usually quiet hearth flared up and a pair of unusual individuals careened through, upsetting a makeshift table

and nearly setting off a portable swamp in the process. The two, never slouches when it came to defending themselves and already with wands free, made short work in binding their intruders.

"Curious lot we have here, don't you think?"

Nodding, Fred prodded the glaring, middle-aged wizard with his boot, "This one I almost recognize. Never heard of someone getting splinched out of the floo though."

"Just legs here," George punctuated his brother's observation with a prod of his own to the space above the still twitching limbs, the body-bind seeming to have had less effect. "And here a bit hidden. Now, who may you be?"

Reaching down, he pulled the cloak free of Harry, and the twins shared a meaningful glance, "Well if it isn't our favorite-

"And only, but that'll change soon enough-

"Investor. Harry, what brings you by?" George, still kneeling by the magically bound young man, seemed to remember himself. "Oh, right." Dismissing the curse, he hopped back as Harry pulled his own wand, his off hand up, warding off any other spells.

Dispelling the bind on Tonks, he helped her up as she resumed her normal face, a process that he still had difficulty watching closely. "Tonks actually, I didn't know you had a store yet," Harry replied, replacing his wand in it's holster.

George shot Fred a meaningful glance, and turned back to the still soot-covered pair. "That begs another question-

"Or three, really now that you mention it."

George nodded at his twin, "First of which – how'd you know we had a store? We've not even open yet, and-

"Mum's still the word, well was at least," Fred finished, retrieving a pitcher of water and a couple extra cups from the small break counter.

"Funny you should word it so, Molly mentioned the name the other day, griping to someone in Grimmauld. Sorry to barge in, but we're at a bit of a loss," her tone back to normal, Tonks sat and sorted the various miniaturized trunks, replacing them back in a semblance of order inside her robe pockets. She also stowed the spare, now quite stolen, wand in her boot and set her own in it's usual place.

Fred rolled his eyes and sat on a bench, motioning at the workroom vaguely, "Leave it to mum to ruin a surprise-"

"When it would have been grand to spring it on you, Harry." Mimicking his twin, George swept his arm about, in the opposite direction. "Well, for what it's worth-"

"Welcome to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Fred announced, the two grinning roguishly to their audience.

Harry and Tonks looked at each other, and the two started chuckling quietly. Leaning his back to the wall, Harry ran a hand over his eyes and relaxed for the first time that day. "You two have no idea how happy I am to be here."

Confused, the twins watched as the two seemed to settle wearily where they were, uncaring of the soot and hard floor. "Well Harry, you'll always be welcome here," Fred replied, offering him a cup of water. "Now, you two look like you have a real winner of a tale to tell-"

"So lets have it, hmm? Don't keep us in suspense!"

Tonks laughed quietly, noting Harry's groan of reluctance, "How about this, we'll tell you everything, as much as we can anyway, if you help us with one small thing." Grinning at her now literal partner in crime, the witch helped an unwilling Harry back to his feet, dusting his back free of soot.

Raising a brow to one another, the two turned identical smiles to the now nervous pair by the hearth. "Deal," they said simply, in unison.

"Why do I suddenly feel like I've gone from the frying pan, and into the fire," Harry mumbled, as Tonks pulled the other two nearer the hearth.

"So," Tonks smiled brightly at the Weasley twins, looking from one to the other happily, "How well do you think we can track a Werewolf?"

Half an hour later, they had all managed to end up on the same page, the brief version of the day's events filling each other in where the gaps were left. Harry's part of the tale was simple, really. After being dropped off by Lupin, he'd simply waited a moment for someone to pass the desk, and slipped into the door behind them. From there, he headed to the DMLE offices, and just nicked the forms off of the desk there. Lupin had mentioned that likely the paperwork wouldn't be filed, as the whole thing took place after hours, so Harry had spent his time searching for unfinished work, rather than completed forms. He'd located them after half an hour of shuffling through petty reports and citations.

He pulled the forms out, showing them to Tonks as he poured himself another cup of water. "I don't see much out of place here," she noted, and Harry had to nod in agreement. The forms had been fairly easy to find, nearly laid out upon a desk, waiting for him.

"I... To be honest?" He took a moment to stare into the water of his cup, feeling worn and brittle. "It seemed too easy. All of it. Should breaking into the Ministry be so trivial?"

Tonks looked away a moment as her eyes clouded, and shrugged. "I would say, that in reality it shouldn't be," sighing expansively, she handed the two forms back to Harry. "But in truth, it is.

"Fudge's regime was built on money funneling into the Ministry's coffers. He made it a standing issue, that people were to be allowed access to the offices, to 'do business' and not harassed," her face a mask of disgust, the witch slammed her cup down on the small work table, rattling the various things upon it noisily. "Sorry, " she muttered darkly. "I just got tired of it, after a while. The corruption. It's great when you can trust people enough to leave doors open and not worry

on what will happen, but it's not the world we live in. And most certainly not the Ministry we live with."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry replied, looking thoughtful. "I always wondered... if no one else really knew how to find me, or could – how was it Umbridge sent Dementors to find me? Makes me glad to be away from the Dursleys now. Who else would be just waltzing by?"

Nodding, Tonks, flashed a grin his way, "Besides, it's not like the place was terribly interesting, anyway," setting her cup down, she stood and settled her robes. "We should be fetching Lupin, before he makes more a mess for himself or gets caught. I don't fancy another trip to DMLE Holding tonight."

"Good idea," Harry agreed, happy for something to distract him from the growing sense of unease at the lack of difficulty dealing with Tonks's imprisonment at the Ministry. He couldn't shake off the feeling something wasn't right, that he was missing some detail. Shaking off the dark thoughts, he looked to his growing list of conspirators and painted on a mirthless grin. "So, where do we start?"

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The odd foursome had Apparated, Harry with Tonks's help but getting more comfortable at the idea the more he was helped along with it, to a park outside one of London's more popular pub rows. Almost immediately they regretted the decision, as a pair of flashlights turned on them at the sound of their appearance, and it took them five minutes to explain away their presence at an investigation scene.

They did learn that there was apparently an animal from the zoo loose, and that they should stay off the streets if possible and try and stay indoors. To them, it just meant they were late locating Lupin, but at least the trail wasn't cold.

Walking beyond the park and the range of the police's listening, Tonks turned to Harry and nodded, "we're close, he was likely here less than an hour ago."

Fred looked about nervously, fingers running over the wand in his pocket idly, "I just sort of realized, we're out hunting a Werewolf. Isn't that somewhat... ah?"

"Stupid, rash, suicidal and daft, brother of mine?"

"Precisely," Fred answered, but both nodded, glancing about anxiously. The night was chill, but there was still enough of the day's warmth to keep it from being uncomfortable. People were walking about, their numbers thinner than usual with the patrols of police about, cordoning off and setting passerby on their way.

Tonks snickered at the twin's antics, but had to concede their point. Harry had told them briefly of Lupin's plan, how he had assured the young wizard that he'd be in control of his mind during the change, but Tonks had doubts. Would not other Werewolves do the same, if it were so easy? Perhaps there were more to it, that the former professor had not mentioned, but even so... Lupin? The same mild, unassuming Remus Lupin that sat with her odd nights at Grimmauld and had tea with her after her guard shifts, barely three weeks ago? The same Lupin who was apparently at large, in greater London with considerably more hair and teeth.

Her concerns compounded when after half an hour they'd still not seen sign of the Werewolf. "Is it usually this difficult to find a rampant changer in a busy city?" Harry's question set the twins to snickering again, but Tonk's simply narrowed her eyes as she looked about, listening intently to the unusually still night.

"No. It shouldn't be," she murmured, concern plain across her features. "The Ministry... on full moons there are mandatory overtime shifts, specifically to assist the Wolf-catcher squads. We should have seen at least one Auror patrol." Her instincts told her to call in, gather some intel or try possibly contacting one of her former coworkers, but she stifled it, buried the impulse deep. It was the fear and anxiety talking, whispering darkly into her ear.

Harry was swinging his head about, trusting the twins to watch forward and Tonks the rear as they moved about, when he saw what could have been a flash, reflected off walls down a distant alley. "There, something over there," he hissed, pointing in the direction of the same. As one, the four turned and sped toward the intersecting streets, wands out and heads down.

They pulled to a sudden stop at the corner, as Tonks had to lean on a wall to keep upright from her laughter. "Club lights, you found us a nightclub, Harry."

Fred voiced his opinion that perhaps Lupin was inside, but George just grabbed his co-conspirator and dragged him after the retreating forms of Harry and Tonks. "Perhaps we went the wrong way," Harry mused after a short while, trying to get their bearings.

"Or maybe we've been missing the obvious," George whispered, pointing to a foot down a near street, visible from the corner. Moving slowly they slipped down the alleyway keeping the streets to either side well in view.

Taking in the scene, Harry was relieved that none of the unconscious they found were Lupin, and that none seemed to be sporting any wounds beyond those from what looked like a heavy fall. "No wounds," he voiced, checking the fallen quickly. "But wizards, Aurors by their robes."

The Weasley twins took up guarding positions on either side of the small group, as Harry slid the unconscious men side by side against the near wall. Tonks checked them as she helped with the task, nodding as she identified the three. "All Wolf-catchers. What should we do?"

"There's nothing to get them mugged over, to a muggle they all look like drunks passed out there." Tonks conjured some whiskey and doused their robes a bit, as Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, considering a moment, looking to the sky and the three men. "We need information. Do you think they saw anything?"

Kneeling by one, the young woman sighed, "Not sure. If they were taken down this clean, may have been an ambush. What are you thinking? We can't really let them know we were here either..."

Scrubbing his hand through his hair, frustrated Harry turned and gestured down the alleyway. "Right, let them be and lets move on. We're behind enough already." The other three shared a concerned look but followed behind Harry as he stalked out to the end of the alley, stopping suddenly. Fred and George slammed into his back as the young wizard started to laugh, shaking his head slowly.

Tonks looked from one to the others and raised a brow, wondering if Harry had been worn too thin over the last few days to manage this. She stopped dead in her wondering when he threw his head back, and howled like a bad movie extra.

Rounding on him and shaking the young wizard, she tried to look at his eyes, gauge him. "What the bloody hell are you doing?"

Grinning, he pulled the twins over and guided them all back into the cove near the break between a warehouse and a nearby storehouse. "Third year, we had to get Lupin to stop attacking Sirius. Bad timing all around, so Hermione howled to get his attention." Clapping the Weasleys on the back, he threw his head back and let loose another reedy howl. Snickering at his own unconvincing performance, he gestured for the others to join in. "C'mon, if we can't get to him, bring him to us!"

Boggling at the three men as they cupped hands around their mouths and howled as one, the former Auror settled nearby, listening for any other noises that they would be missing, in making their own. "You'll bring more than Lupin, the Catcher squads will hear this as well." Reaching out she dragged the three by their robes back to the park, and leaned against the back side of a bus box.

"Right, smart plan, stupid execution," she sniped, glancing around the corner of the box anxiously. "George, Fred – flip that bench around, make it face the street. Harry, you're with me, into the bus box, grab a paper."

The twins saluted, snapping a brief "Sir, yes sir," her way before hurrying off, as Tonks settled into the box, Harry following soon after with a discarded newspaper in hand. It was less than a handful of moments before they were in place, the pair in the bus box settled close and supposedly looking over a paper, while the twins made a hardly convincing scene on the bench, chattering quietly to one another. A minute, maybe two passed before the Apparations sounded, and two teams at least, converged on the corner they'd vacated.

"They're fast tonight, but spread thin... only groups of three it seems," Tonks leaned closer, and pointed with a rise of her chin to a single man, left behind to the corner. "Wary now, too."

Harry was thinking less of his impromptu plan as time passed. "What can we do? Lupin obviously can manage three, but five or more? Damnit, I just led him to a trap." Biting his lip, the Boy-Who-Lived thought frantically, trying to find some way to fix this. Some way to keep his last tie to the Marauders safe. Pulling his wand, he fumbled at his belt and unfurled his cloak.

"Harry, what are you doing? No! You can't go out there!" Hissing, the former Auror grabbed at the young man's sleeve, only to be shrugged off. "This isn't a time to be a hero!"

"I'm not," he shot back, disappearing from sight.

Swearing, the young woman Disillusioned herself and silenced her feet, running as fast as she could to the twins. "Harry's going in there, I'm following him. If... hell!" She watched as a swift shadow darted down a side street, a hint of amber eyes in the dark. Taking hold of Fred, she leaned close, whispering, "If it all goes south, Get. Out. Understood?"

Nodding, the Weasleys cocked her a pair of mismatched salutes and Disapparated, leaving her to catch up to an invisible Harry. "Damn my luck," she muttered, hurrying to shadow the lone watchman, in his guardpost.

She'd nearly made it to his position when he fell to a brief red flash, limply to the curb. Eyes widening, she stifled another curse as she nearly tripped, crossing to where she'd seen the spell fire. "Harry!" Tonks nearly screamed when his voice sounded, barely by her shoulder.

"I'm right here," he whispered, taking hold of her sleeve after a moment's fumbling. "Where are the twins?"

"No idea," she murmured, relieved at his presence. "You stunned him."

Harry chuckled quietly, tugging at her sleeve toward the alleyway. "He was the guard, and he was talking into his wand. I don't know what he was saying, but I figured we needed to cut the line of communication," loosing the witch, he moved around the corner quickly. Proceeding forward, his eyes were everywhere but on the man he nearly ran up upon, and came up nearly immediately face to face with a wary Auror, watching his groups rear. Windmilling, he nearly slammed into the man, but the damage was done.

The nervous man called out a short, "Who's there?" before the alleyway erupted into chaos.

From the far side, Lupin seemed to lunge from a shadow upon a wall and took down three Aurors immediately, picking up one in a clawed hand by the robe and catching a stunner aimed his way with the man. The guard facing Harry threw up his wand and cast a blindingly bright flash spell, which got a yell from higher up on the buildings, cries Harry recognized as belonging to Fred and George. The fallen Aurors rounded on Lupin as the Werewolf staggered, dazed from the flash and set into him with a series of spells that left him wincing and stumbling against the far wall, whimpering.

Tonks saw the spells hit Remus and bit her lip to stifle a scream, throwing a silencing charm on the man before Harry as he tried in vain to call out spells after at the young wizard, now partly visible. From above, a small rain of odd black things fell around them, and then the most damnable noise imaginable was surrounding them.

The man Harry has surprised was still trying to get his wits, but with Harry so close, stowed his wand and looked to grapple with the young man. Tonks swapped her wand to her off hand, snapping out a stunner toward the huddled wizards in the cacophony, while slugging Harry's man in the jaw with her right. "Get him, get Moony," she yelled after him, hoping they were not too late, already.

Harry caught sight of Tonks's swing from the corner of his eye, and mimicked her, swapping his wand to his left hand. Concentrating hard on a mailbox, pulling it before him wandlessly and throwing it hard at the closest man to Lupin, he took aim with his wand. Trailing it he sent a disarming spell at an Auror aiming for George or Fred above, as they started sending wary spells down into the melee.

As the postbox slammed into a man with less effect than he'd hoped, Harry screamed as something tore into his shoulder and spun him around, the spray of blood from it clouding his vision, fouling his glasses. Tonks's eyes widened as she heard the report echo about the alley, and swung around to see an open doorway, and a silhouette there. "Gun!" she screamed out into the night, as one Auror and she turned and launched spells at the man. Her binding curse was followed with a stunner, and the man fell stiff out of his doorway, impacting almost comically against his flower box and leaning there, resembling nothing so much as a toppled mannequin.

Harry's scream started something black and angry inside Lupin's chest. He knew it was Harry – could smell his scent, the familiar anxiety from the other side of the alleyway. He could smell Tonks as well, and what was likely the twins... and the small mob of Aurors between them. Lupin knew this group would fall him, likely he'd end up injured from it, but if he drew their attention-

Nothing went right. The gunshot rang out, shocking him and all present, only adding to the haze in his spell-addled mind. Then Harry screamed.

Remus answered the sound with a roar, ripping loose a solid guttering pipe and swinging it with all his considerable strength into one blue-robed man, sending him flying. The second before him fared no better, backhanded heavily into a wall not a yard away. As the hit

contacted though, things went hazy and dark with a flash of red, and he slumped and fell, screaming into the darkness of his mind at his body to get up, to answer him.

One Auror remained, as Tonks ducked around to check from her cover. He was swinging his wand about wildly, and when she'd cleared her cover briefly a spell whizzed by her head, making her fall back hard. "Damnit," she hissed, but shortly the sound of a body hitting the ground made her duck and look again. No sign of the Auror, was there. Crouching, she slowly slid out of her cover and broke for the wall when the double staccato of Apparitions to either side of her, sent her spinning and falling back, a shield snapping up and a curse on her lips.

Four raised hands, and two red heads of hair met her ready spell. "Damnit... Are we clear?"

"They're all down, so is Har-"

Tonks cut the man off with a glare and finger to her lips. "No names. Lets get ourselves and our own out of here." Rising with the help of a hand up, she went quickly to find Harry and check on him. She could only guess with his scream and the gunshot he had to have been hit. Tonks found him nearly where he'd fallen, gripping his shoulder and panting in pain. Kneeling beside him she winced at the heavy bloom of dark against this shoulder and neck, "Hey, hey... we're going to get out of here now, we have Lupin and the twins are alright. Can you stand?"

Harry stopped his rapid breathing a moment, vision going gray at the edges. "I'm... I'm ok. Lets get him and go."

"You two, get him out of here. Take him back where we met," gesturing to Harry, she crossed the unconscious Aurors to Lupin's side, hearing a mumbled protest and muffled groan as the Fred and George got Harry up and Apparated away with a pair of muted cracks. Tonks looked Lupin over with a grim set to her lips, seeing nothing that she could identify as a wound or injury.

Mincing closer she started when the Werewolf took a great gasping breath and went still again. Trying desperately to still her raging heartbeat, she closed the last few feet and swallowed the massive lump that seemed to be lodged between her tongue and heart. Managing to get a breath past it, she kept it long enough to whisper, voice gone brittle and weak, "Alright... ok. We're going now, alright? Just... don't bite off my arm please." Reigning in her fear, she leaned down and tucked an arm around Lupin's neck, eyes screwed closed as she spent a desperate moment clearing her thoughts. Looking up, she blinked at the harsh light shining down at them from the moon and sent up a spray of sparks, for other Aurors in the area. No sense leaving the good guys to lay in a gutter, she thought bitterly, even if it was her fault.

When she looked back down, a pair of luminous amber eyes were looking back up at her, blinking slowly. Remus, seeing Tonks's violet eyes looking back down at him, widening with fright simply closed his own and nodded slowly.

"Right... time to go."

Three minutes later an Auror recovery team moved carefully into the area, and found six of their own, unconscious, and battered but otherwise alright. Of their attackers, there was no sign.

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"Aurors? We were supposed to be getting Lupin-"

George scoffed, "Hunting him, a Werewolf, but instead?"

"We get in a fight with Aurors!" Fred finished angrily, settling his cloak on the back of a chair. George had laid Harry out on the small couch they had in the shop, and they made a call to a friend, who'd graduated to go on to St. Mungo's. "I think we're in over our heads, dear brother."

As one the twins ran a hand through their hair, looking to the young wizard bleeding on their couch, unconscious.

On cue, Tonks Apparated into the room with a still groggy and still very shapeshifted Lupin. The twins blanched as the Werewolf shook his great head, obviously trying to get his wits about him.

Tonks held up a warding hand, one still on Remus, "Don't worry – he's not sick with the hunger. Regardless, I'm going to get him to the Shack and then Apparate back after." Crossing the room, she knelt by Harry and ran a concerned hand along his forehead, shifting his hair slightly from his face. "Just wanted to see how you were..." her voice went quiet and soft, as her eyes glistened suddenly, causing the witch to look away. "Damn brave idiot." Tonks looked over his shoulder and her jaw set angrily.

A gunshot, she railed to herself. Harry-Bloody-Potter nearly killed over a gunshot, from some spooked muggle. Sighing she reset the dressing quietly, until Fred cleared his throat, shaking his head toward the groggy Werewolf by the hearth. Vowing to have words with them on the nature of allies and bad times to annoy her, she gave Harry one more look and turned away.

Standing quickly she went to George's side, and they shortly went over calling their friend, how soon they'd arrive. She instructed them to set up any wards they had as soon as she left and the two grimly agreed. "I'll be back, but will come up Diagon. Keep an ear on your door," she muttered, and crouched by Lupin, spiriting him away to the Forest and the Shack.

An hour later, many scolding and cold looks from their former classmate, and a now sleeping and tended Harry Potter, left the two usually boisterous twins exhausted and wearily resting in their own shop. "Perhaps we should pick up that upstairs apartment?" They were currently living at the Burrow, in their second floor room but with all the hustle and bustle with the shop, and the Burrow's now overcrowded population seemed – cramping. Fleur and Bill had announced their engagement, but little more than that, but it was enough. Molly had too many directions to focus, and seemed to vacillate between dire to delirious at the tip of a hat.

Bill had told them, candidly that he wanted to just elope and get it well and done, but that it was truly Molly herself that set the date forward. She simply needed to do this, he said. The planning and order of a wedding, their older brother claimed, seemed to still her soul.

So the engagement was announced, and plans were tentatively made for a year following. Molly and he had decided that to be near enough for Bill's comfort, and enough time for his mother to make a proper fiasco of things.

Plus, Fleur absolutely refused to elope. The French woman had insisted, steadfastly to have a wedding. A large wedding.

"Perhaps, somewhere close. To here," Fred answered, sharing his twin's musing, standing slowly as the front door chimed its bell. Looking to a time piece he winced, realizing what day it was, now. Preoccupied, he crossed the store's main room, still strewn about with half-stocked shelves and dozens of incomplete displays. Tonks's anxious face at the door beckoned him on, and pulling the portal open, he let back in. "Lupin settled, then?"

Nodding, Tonks stifled a yawn and seemed intent to peer through him, the wall and store itself to look to Harry. "He's fine, right as can be expected. Alyssa set his shoulder strait, took out the bullet and mended him, so he's just needing rest and a bit of a break for that arm." She moved to go by him but an hand on her shoulder stopped her. "He is sleeping though. How was Remus?"

Pausing, she closed her eyes and nodded, once more. "Lupin's fine. I'm going to collect him in the morning after he's had some rest." Peering back into the back storeroom, she heaved a sigh. "I'll be quiet," Tonks mumbled but looked about the storefront with a grimace. "You would set this place up like a minefield wouldn't you?"

Fred peered about and grinned, "Well, most people would manage fine," snorting a laugh, he dodged the blow Tonks aimed at his arm and danced back among the half-finished displays. "Remember, quietly."

"You wretched git," she hissed and proceeded to mince her way, taking easily a full three minutes to manage the ten yard floorspace to the back room. Crossing the threshold to the storeroom, she took in the scene and loosed a relieved breath. Harry lay, sleeping, with his arm in a sling at his side. A new wrapping of bandages crisscrossed his shoulder and upper arm, and she could see the even and steady rise and fall of his breath.

Fred had assured her, but seeing set her mind at ease. "Thank you," she murmured to the twins, sitting by the small couch and laying her head along the cushion, near Harry.

Sharing a significant glance, the two Weasleys grinned and crossed to the hearth, "Well, we're heading home, likely to a lecture about being out late-

"And perhaps an hour of sleep after." George sighed and took a handful of powder.

"Tomorrow, we'll be in around noon," Fred amended, looking over the room once more.

The two of them glared slightly at Tonks, "And then we expect a story," they scolded, as one. The floo took them and left a chuckling Tonks, settling her robe and leaning on the couch's arm, as comfortably as she could.

Night, what was left of it passed quickly, much too quickly for one so weary as Lupin. "Cor... Auch. Hanging around Tonks too much," the Werewolf muttered, swatting at the light slanting through the Shack's boarded windows. Righting himself, he scrounged the change of robes he'd left for the day, a decent set this time. He was still rubbing at his jaw, the soreness barely tolerable when the Willow's ward ticked at the back of his mind.

"Too early for salesmen," he mumbled, knowing well there were few that knew the way to the Shack. Shuffling to the basement, he was met with a rather surprising sight, so early in day. "Severus, lovely to see you," he greeted tiredly, the lack of sincerity so clear in his voice it crackled like glass.

His dark eyes shifting about, Snape settled by the tunnel, leaning against the wall warily, "Where are they?" He demanded shortly, sparing no pretense on a greeting.

"I'm afraid if you're looking for the Harpies, I sent them home earlier. Wore the lot out you see-"

"Enough with the wit, you were never skilled," the potions master snapped, glaring daggers at the Marauder. "The ones with you, last night. Where are they?"

Rubbing at his temple, Remus shook his head slowly. "By the time I do remember finding someone I wasn't trying to knock senseless, the potion had nearly worn off. The extra bit you put in worked, but didn't last the entire time."

Snape took the comment about his work as a personal affront, and drew himself up stiffly. "I warned you, of the limitations. Perhaps it was not my potion that was of poor quality, but the one who ingested it," words dripping scorn, the man none the less was obvious in his concern. "Did you bite, or scratch anyone?"

Lupin shook his head, sighing. "Not that I remember, and if what you're accusing me of is true, then that moment would be when things began wearing off. After that, I don't remember anything."

"How remarkably convenient," Severus drawled, unconvinced. "The Headmaster relented, after seeing reason. With all that has been happening, your small problems slipped his mind. Last night's... fiasco has brought it quite sharply into focus."

Chuckling, Lupin stretched, taking small pleasure in the uncomfortable wincing his noisome joints were causing the lank-haired man. "Good to know he still counts me an ally, then. I would not like to be on the wrong side of his graces," Remus added quietly, raising a brow.

Snape's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Indeed," he answered simply, looking about the room one last time. "So, it would seem you

are alone here – not that I expect anyone to wait the night on you to wake, potion or no."

"It's nice to have the esteem of your peers," Remus shot back with a roll of his eyes. "If you're satisfied, I'd like to eat before you manage to ruin my appetite. Quite a feat, considering circumstances and you are doing a smashing job of it so far."

Smirking slightly, Snape turned abruptly to depart, his leaving comment drifting back through the tunnel, "I strive for excellence."

Shuffling back up the stairs, Lupin tried to shake off the foul impression the potion master always seemed to leave on his mind. He just felt... unclean afterward. "Strive for a bath, and we'll be a lot happier," he muttered over his shoulder, wondering himself if he had time to shower before someone came – hopefully, to reclaim him and fill the gaps in his hazy memory.

Stowing his only slightly worn robe, he set to do just that, canceling the Disillusionment and ward on one of the few well-maintained rooms in the abandoned manor. He did owe much to Dumbledore, this was true. The man had made his schooling possible, in setting aside the Shack for him in the early 1970's, during his own time at Hogwarts. Without the haven of the place for his changes, it was likely that Lupin would have been caught out by the other students.

That debt made it difficult for him to act against the esteemed wizard. Like many, it seemed he owed the man some loyalty, if only because he'd accrued an obligation through action. The Headmaster could have also been much more strict with the Marauders themselves, but time and practice had shown the man's sense of humor and levity more prominent than his adherence to every rule and stricture.

The Shack, the Marauders and his own resolve were the only things that allowed him to seize on the those years, and be just a student, just a young man in school, as opposed to a cursed youth with no future.

That was why his recent, and not so recent decisions had been so difficult. "Why did you have to lose faith in me, James? We could

have prevented this all..." the recrimination echoed dully about washroom, as it always did. He hated the question. Calling into doubt his own best friend's trust in him.

It was that very trust though, that had been questioned. James had grown paranoid, after Harry's birth. The black mood had colored everything between the elder Potter and his once-closest friends, and in the end, that strain had broken the bonds they had, nearly beyond repair. In truth, he admitted it was fully shattered.

He never had the chance to reconcile with James. Stubborn, devoted and utterly protective of his family, the man had shut out almost everyone, after Sirius insisted on refusing to key himself to the Fidelius. The reasoning was lost on Lupin, but James didn't question it. Some story about family and blood and law, which was beyond Lupin's knowledge. After Sirius had refused to be key, Lupin had stepped forward, only to be shoved back. Unable to confide or honestly trust his own first mate by his own admittance, James had withdrawn, and eventually relied on Pettigrew for the task.

A mistake they'd all rue. Lupin cursed Sirius, James, and Peter for the tragedy, and himself as well, knowing that if he were to be in such a place, perhaps he would do the same. That betrayal of trust, having his friend turn on him so, had cut him deeply. Didn't the Marauders learn Animagus forms, just to keep him company? Was he not 'Moony', the first to be named in their scheme? Constant conspirator, tactician and planner, yet he was the first to be openly distrusted.

That schism had carried on with him, after the death of James and Lily. The dichotomy of his feelings had him broken for a long while, between anger at the man, and sorrow for his loss. Compound this with Sirius's mismanaged fate, of which he had no chance to have a say. He had no proof, no way to prove that Pettigrew was the betrayer with things as they stood, and all things and evidence pointing at Sirius, and suddenly Lupin was left alone, for the first time in seven years. Scared, hurt, he'd retreated for a time, unsure now who to trust. Dumbledore's actions, the Ministry's rash judgment, all left him wary and confused. He'd briefly entertained trying to track down Harry...

He shook off the dark thoughts, as usual creeping in on him the day after his change, drawn to the surface by his condition. The Werewolf let the the water from the shower beat at his back, dispelling his mind's wandering for the time being. "Have to stop wallowing and get on with it," he murmured, finishing his shower and shrugging on the clean robes. "Time to face the light, and the world."

Nearly an hour later, the wards tickled at his mind again and Lupin went to meet the new guest, hoping it wasn't Snape back for another pleasant visit.

"Wotcher," Tonks greeted wearily, pausing at the threshold of the basement's entrance. "How is it after the night you had, you end up looking better than I feel?"

Chuckling the Werewolf settled on a crate, smiling up at the witch. "Wholesome living, I'd have to say."

Tonks shook her head, rubbing at her still-sandy feeling eyes. "Whatever, Remus. We owe the twins some explanation for getting them out last night after your flea-bitten hide," gesturing down the tunnel, she started off.

Remus sighed and rubbed idly at his temple, "Good morning to you, too."

They walked in silence toward the Apparation point that Remus frequented, Tonks too weary to focus on much else than walking, Remus trying not to focus on anything. It was near the small clearing that Lupin paused, reaching out to the witch, "Before we go..." Turning and mumbling a question, Tonks paused to lean on a large tree. "Thank you, for coming to find me. It was a half-cooked idea, at best but the only way I could think of to clear enough people from the Ministry to give Harry a chance."

Grinning slightly, Tonks shrugged off the thanks, "Really, was nothing. You were helping Harry, Harry was helping me. Only proper, yeah? Now, do you remember where we brought you first last night?"

"No, by then I was too hazy with the potion to remember much. My last memory was... that fight."

At Remus's troubled look, Tonks laid a hand along his arm, "Hang on then, we'll get you up to speed along with them." So saying, she Apparated the two of them to 93 Diagon Alley.

Breakfast was a tense affair, at the shop as the twins bustled about the storeroom, simultaneously attempting to work on their stock, look after Harry as he lay aggravated and irate, and trying to eat what food they'd pick up in passing.

He'd not been awake long, as whatever the woman had given him last night put him down for a solid eight hours. When he did wake up, in a strange place, without his glasses and unable to move his arm, his first reaction had been to call for Tonks.

George had assured him she'd be by soon, as Fred proceeded to rock the small room by exploding something spectacularly nearby. Swapping places while the now blacken-faced Fred went on to explain that she'd been here all night, and just stepped out to collect Remus, who was sleeping off the rest of the night at 'home', which Harry took to mean the Shack.

"Did you save some for us?" Harry's eyes snapped to the door, where a weary Tonks and Lupin leaned, the witch grinning despite the dark circles under her eyes. George passed by eating something from a plate and gestured to the folding tray supporting what looked to be half of the Burrow's breakfast portions. "Brilliant," she sighed, and sped over, collecting a plate for herself.

Remus shook his head and followed, but stopped once his eyes fell on Harry, reclining on the couch. "What happened to your arm?"

The room went still for a few moments, as everyone looked from Harry to Lupin and back. Clearing his throat, Harry shrugged and sat a bit straiter in the chair. "When we found you, the noise seemed to wake or annoy some muggles nearby. One came out, fired a shot." Grinning a bit and running a hand along his bandages, the young

wizard gestured for a plate. "I'm fine, the twins called a healer last night."

Still a bit pale from the shock of hearing Harry so nonchalantly talking about being shot, Lupin forgot about the meal laid out and crouched by the young wizard, looking over the wound, "this... was during the fight, with the Aurors."

Harry grimaced and nodded slowly. "That was my fault. I used that trick Hermione tried when we were all in the Shack that one year. Howling and hoping you'd track the sound. We were having a damned hard time finding you."

Nodding, George pointed at Tonks with a fork, "Yes, and I'd like to state for the record that Fred and I wanted no part of assaulting Aurors, mind."

A slight clearing of a throat caught their attention, and as one the four turned at the sound. Tonks's eyes widened, and the only thing that kept her from dropping the plate laden with food was the steadying hand that Fred offered, guiding her to sit on a bench. "I'll keep that in mind, but I make no guarantees," Rufus Scrimgeour said, holding his hands up empty before him. "I'm not armed, I come to talk."

"Mother taught us not to speak about unpleasant things over a meal," Fred quipped, turning from where he'd left a pale-faced Tonks. "One of the many thousand things she had on that list since we started sharing a table, was politics."

Chuckling, Rufus strode into the room and looked over Lupin's shoulder, at Harry and his injury, eyes narrowing. "Smart woman," he murmured, head tilting slightly. "Was this done by one of mine?"

"Muggle," Harry offered weakly, not understanding who this person was, or why he was in the twin's shop. What did gather his attention was Tonks's look of shock and Lupin's sudden tenseness. His wording clued Harry on though, "'One of mine', so you're Rufus Scrimgeour."

"That I am, current head of the Auror Office," the man offered, limping slightly as he strode over to the young wizard, extending a hand in greeting. Harry eyed it warily, but shook it with his good arm. "I'm not here to reclaim Tonks, or level any charges. In fact, I'm not entirely sure where I am, so if this is a... safe house, then it remains so. You may relax."

Scoffing, Fred crossed his arms as George settled against a wall support across the room from his twin. "I'll relax when you explain why your here, and how you came about that state."

Stepping back, the man crossed to the hearth and conjured himself a small footstool to sit upon. The tensing of the room wasn't missed as he pulled a wand, and he slid it back away slowly. "Apologies. Yes, I do apologize for barging in, as I've done," looking about him, the man's oddly colored eyes seemed to miss little. "You must admit, Mr. Potter, it is rather difficult to find you recently."

"So I've been told... sir." Harry replied, pausing a moment before adding the title to his words. He didn't know the man before him well, at all truly, beyond that he was involved in Tonks's arrest the day before. Despite it, he was curious on why the man had sought him out, and appreciably wary. "What brings you to us, today? You seem to have business for me?"

"Indeed. Indeed I do, as you may know there is a Wizengamot called for this afternoon, and I was wondering if I could convince you to attend, and possibly after speak with me.

"Oh, and by the way, Mr. Potter, Lord Black. Happy Birthday," raising a small cup of water, the man raised it in a toast. "Many happy returns."

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AN: Revisions, seeing as my last Beta didn't really follow through with their task...

Loose ends with the wedding cleaned up. A final note on Canon deviation: Summary states AU. The timeframe involved in the engagement announcement is in the summer of '96, canonically. Same as here. This will not be addressed again.

If there is a wedding. I could have Arthur kill everyone in their sleep the night before. This is fanfiction, after all.

Chapter Ten

I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.

–Charles de Gaulle

When Harry had first learned he was a magical person, a wizard as it was come to be known, the first thought in his head was how wonderful it would be to leave the place he was. How simple and fantastic a life he could lead with magic at his call. It was a dream, beyond his meager experience that the world of magic presented to him those first few times he'd been exposed to it.

Reality, often, broke down the miracle of dreams quite harshly. Cursing quietly, even inside his own musings, Harry reigned in his errant thoughts. He was not fated to live some nightmare forever. He was not fated to be some constant fall-guy in some great tragedy. Already he'd begun shaping his own way, a path to lead him out and beyond the shadow he was currently trapped within.

It was not so bad, really, he admitted, packing a few more things into the trunks he'd taken to carrying on his person constantly. He had good friends. He had lead an exciting, if burdened life. Learned much, loved some, cried little. Smiling to himself, Harry had to admit it wasn't all that bad, taken from a distance.

Up close, as close as he was, sure – it had faults. Many, in fact. But it was his life. He'd come to grips recently with it, come to appreciate it.

He could not, though, appreciate the smells coming from the small kitchen above 93 Diagon. "Merlin, Tonks what are you doing to the poor eggs?"

"Treating them to a more merciful end than the last one to insult my cooking, git," her testy reply shot back, muffled slightly by the walls and her own clanging about in the kitchen.

Chuckling to himself, he had to admit she had no talent for the culinary arts, unlike her grasp of the magical. "I'll be right out to help, just finishing the last of my packing."

A small sigh reached the room, from the harried former Auror. "You're a dear. I'll work on the tea and toast."

Recalling a mental catalog of what was in the kitchen to work with, Harry idly stared, unseeing at his trunks. His hands were good at cooking, the small domestic things in the kitchen. Practical skills always seemed to be his best suit, unlike the complex, intricate planning that was currently guiding his life. Thoughts of those plans snapped his awareness back into the present, the trunks in front of him. Packing for their next step wasn't easy, nor was the knowledge of what he'd be doing, but it was his best chance. Both of their best chances.

Two weeks ago, it had been his birthday, one he'd remember for a number of reasons. First in that list, was that his shoulder stung like the dickens and he woke in the new and yet-to-be opened Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George had briefed him on the minor points, before the former Auror and his now official partner in crime had arrived back, hauling the still-groggy Lupin with her. Shortly after their brief morning reunion, another, less welcome visitor had come calling.

At the Auror Office's toast to his health and well wishes on his birthday, Harry barked a laugh, one that would have made Sirius start. "Happy Birthday?" Sitting up, the young man waved off Tonks' attempts to settle him back on the couch. "I doubt seriously that is the source of your visit."

Shrugging slightly, the head of the Auror Offices simply took another sip of his water. "As you like, but it is for that reason I have a proposition for you." Sitting back up more comfortably for his leg, the older, man fixed his amber eyes on Harry, and again the young man felt the man's plain charisma hit him like a physical blow. If Voldemort could be said to have an aura of evil, this man had an aura of command. "I will cut to the chase.

"My address of you as Lord Black was not in jest or sarcasm. You are, now, according to the Wizarding world the heir to and proper holder of that House." This wasn't unknown to Harry, and he knew it was

tied to the other thing he'd picked up on with the man's conversation earlier. True to his word though, Rufus Scrimgeour continued. "I mentioned in part what my reason for this visit was. There will be a Wizengamot this afternoon, the timing of which I'm sure you are aware."

His eyes unconsciously slipped to Tonks, and Rufus betrayed a bit of his amusement. "Yes, apparently added at the last minute to that agenda, is a hearing in regard to your kidnapping."

Hazarding to show his hand, Harry shrugged noncommittally. "What proof? We have the paperwork, the records. If those aren't present, how can they make a case?"

Chuckling, Scrimgeour conceded the point, without bringing up his own trump card. "Indeed, without the record of the crime, we only have the memories of those involved to rely on. Without those present to be called on, the charge would be considered moot till voiced again."

"Which won't happen," Harry replied firmly, his gaze steely. "As I am no longer a minor, I can't very well be reported kidnapped when I've been seen publicly, openly, willingly."

Sighing, the head of the Auror Office shook his head, "Harry, you need to remember where, what you are. The Wizarding world has ways beyond those of muggles to do such things. Unforgivables, dark arts, rituals." Closing his eyes, Rufus none the less offered the pretty former Auror a smile. "If it's any help, I am inclined to think of this scenario.

"Auror Tonks, seeing in a young man of her acquaintance some difficulty or danger, removed him from the place of his dwelling under cover and duress, obviously without any other option." Pausing to gauge their reactions, he was pleased when neither gave up a hint to him. "The two fall off the map, quite effectively I may add, only to reappear for the hearing of your Godfather's Will. Prepared for all arguments, and working for Harry's benefit, the two seem to have the situation well in hand, alluding to a busy time before working to that end. Conveniently, an order for her arrest is placed, but

circumventing normal channels. This speeds the Aurors to apprehend her at the Bank, while young Potter is unaccounted for."

Pausing in his recount, the man shook his head slowly, the great mane of hair only adding to his leonine appearance. "There are many question, but few answers. I was hoping to help, both of us, with that. If you will let me, of course."

Tonks, silent up to here spoke up, "Why should we trust you? If anything, aren't you neck-deep in this as well? You were, after all, there when I was picked up." Though her tone started neutral, by the end it had gone cold and forceful.

Laughing, the man set the entire room on edge, "Sorry, forgive me. Tell, me, what did you think, seeing me there?" Pausing only a moment to let them consider, he looked from the former Auror to the twins with a grin making his face lopsided. "Perhaps another Ministry toady simply working my way further up the food chain, giving myself some publicity?" Snorting, Rufus dismissed the image with a wave of his hand, "It does suit this Ministry's ideals, does it not?"

Nodding, but looking distressed, Tonks glanced to Harry only to see on his face the same confusion, but tinged it was a spike of anger she'd not seen before. "So, you knew? Knew this was all a fabrication, a slander tactic against Tonks?"

"Not at the time. I simply felt it needful to assist my people in apprehending a potentially prepared and dangerous target. But such actions, predictable, normal in these times, are useful." His brow knit then, and he leaned back against the hearth, looking much beyond his years. "But it was obvious, that something was wrong. How fast. Nothing more than an order, but no inquiry, no report."

"So you were curious."

Harry's observation set the man laughing again. "No, curious was long ago. Here I was suspicious. Again, the Ministry was preying on it's own. Why?

"You see it, I wager." Nodding to Nymphadora, the older man sighed quietly. "The Ministry is... broken. Too long the fear and influence of

those that traffic in it, have shaped the Wizarding government. It started before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and has only gotten worse." Running a hand over his eyes, the face that the collected looked back at, seemed not the commanding, confident and in control man they'd first seen suddenly appear in their midst.

Gathering himself from his thoughts, Rufus seemed to regain some of the presence he was known for. "This is why I'm here. Why I've come to you."

It made sense, Harry admitted, the puzzle here at least being clear. "You want me to see this Wizengamot, see the rot in the Ministry myself. You know that my title comes with the assignment of seats on the Wizengamot, and hope I can change something. Preferably to your benefit and suggestion."

"There's no way to fix the decay that's settled in the Ministry in an easy way. It's too deep for a simple infusion to make it whole again," Scrimgeour admitted, sidestepping the other point, but nodded to Harry's statement none the less. "You've seen, first hand, how deep this runs. But enough talk of this, I have some answers for you, and you may also have some for me."

Confusion lit the young Potter's face, but it was Tonks who rose and leveled a hard glare at the Auror. "Mr. Scrimgeour, as much as I liked working as an Auror, I have to ask how is it, truly, you are here?" Pausing just a moment, she gestured about her, "Talk of my arrest and the possibilities for how and why Harry went missing are well and good, but obviously that isn't the reason."

Chuckling, Rufus nodded once, conceding the point. "Yes, yes. You are right. Though it pains me, I have to admit that Mr. Potter has made a small error." Sighing, Scrimgeour set a carefully neutral cast to his face, before his next words, "there is still a record of the arrest order in the Ministry."

Waving down the panic and frustration he'd caused, Rufus continued, "I understand your worry. I obviously disagree with this whole situation, or I'd be doing something more than talking with you, considering I know you have the other copy here with you."

It was Harry's turn to level a calculating stare at the man sitting before them. As usual, someone from the Ministry, some wizard wanted him for something. It was tiresome, but Rufus was showing them a measure of not only trust in his openness but also trying to gain theirs. Why? He could just as easily be forcing them into a very tight place. Narrowing his eyes, Harry figured the direct approach here may be best. "What do you want?"

The head of the Auror Office seemed to consider his hands for a moment, before standing. Turning to face the wall where schematics and plans were littered, he nodded, as if to an unheard voice. "Come with me, this afternoon to the Wizengamot. There will be much going on, and it will be difficult. The first dockets for the day are trials for those captured in the DoM fiasco months ago."

Harry's blood went cold at this, and the pieces seemed to fit together more solidly. "You want me to testify."

"Yes," nodding, and turning with a wry smile, Rufus chuckled again. "I would think, now, your voice would override any pretense and pandering those of the Dark Lord's employ could manage. Also... I want you to see. See what it is I'm trying to fight here. Fudge is on the way out, that much is clear and-

"You want in," Harry's bland tone stalled Rufus, but any further observation or interruption was absent.

"Yes. I think it's long past-due that the Ministry had a Minister, not a puppet or fool at its head. You know, as well as I, that the Dark Lord's agents are there as well, and likely backing someone of their own choosing." Returning to his small chair, Scrimgeour sank into it and ran a hand along his knee, trying to sooth the old ache. "I would like your help in this."

Reaching up his good hand, Harry rubbed at his temple lightly. "What do we get out of this?"

A glint came to Rufus's eye, at those words. Looking about him, the man's gaze rested more than a moment on the twins, before returning to Harry. "I've been thinking..."

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"This is a... drastic plan. Are you sure, Harry?"

Though the twins and Remus had been present for the spin Rufus had offered them, only Harry and Tonks were present currently, in the Weasley's shop. Lupin had made his way home, to avoid any chance of setting the trail he left too close to them – after all being a known Werewolf was only one step better than a known dark wizard. Fred and George decided it best to keep a reasonable distance from the two, to which Harry and Tonks agreed. It stung slightly, but the two of them could easily understand their worry, after last night's assault on the Aurors chasing Lupin.

Despite all the noise and worry circling about his head like a mad snitch, Harry's thoughts easily settled on Nymphadora's words. The concern in Tonks voice that afternoon made him stop and question his choices again. Were he keeping count, this may easily be the hundredth time so far. And he'd yet to have tea. "I think so. There's no good way to be sure in this though. It's all best-case, worst-case and damage control."

Pursing her lips, Tonks sighed. "I suppose, but what about the prophecy?"

Leaning back against the couch, Harry spared the pretty witch a grin, "Would you rather place your faith in the mumblings of a hack seer or the hands of able Aurors?" Pulling at the sling his arm was in, Harry winced as the dull ache roared into searing pain. "Tch... besides. Who said I was giving up?"

Tilting her head, Tonks could see the logic in Harry's thinking. "It has merit. I just worry on what will happen."

"I've been worrying for what seems like ages. About how a teenager is supposed to miraculously overcome someone who can rival Dumbledore. So far, it's done little but lose me sleep," pulling off the

last of the bindings, Harry let his arm drop to his side with a stifled gasp. "Bloody smarts."

"Language," wrinkling her nose, Nymphadora spared him one last questioning glance. "You are positive you want me to use this one? The minor healing spells aren't so dramatic, but field ones can be rather... shocking."

Nodding, Harry took a deep breath and met the witch's eyes. "I can't walk into the Wizengamot looking like I've been out chasing Werewolves – even if I have. Lets get this over-"

"Sanatio."

Harry promptly whimpered and fell to his knees, as the spell mended many weeks worth of healing in a few moments. "You... have horrible bedside manner."

Kneeling down beside the still shaking young wizard, Nymphadora gently inspected the now-whole flesh of his arm. "Looks alright... This would be better done with a healer and some potions, but for a fast fix, this will have to do."

Blinking away the spots in his vision, Harry had to admit, he walked into that one unprepared. The sometimes dire injuries he'd taken, the occasional regrowth of a bone, nothing was like this. Tonks' healing spell lit his shoulder on fire, dug into his body, then flared and shot back out like a spray of fireworks. "S'ok. I'm ok."

"Can you stand?"

Harry nodded and got unsteadily to his feet. The reason behind the rushed use of a field-healing spell, something normally used to set and repair bones and muscles by Aurors and Hit Wizards until they could get proper medical attention, was their appointment this afternoon. Rufus had convinced them that his plan was sound, additionally, his other ideas had caught their attention as well.

They were both wary of trusting the man, but he'd given them a Wizard's Oath that he'd do his best to keep Tonks' false arrest and charges out of the wizard's council. As well, he'd agreed to look over

and help Harry with his other idea – which incidentally, matched both wizard's plans. Rufus and the Aurors under him would be able to help Harry with the logistics of picking out new Wizengamot seats, assuring that the people he picked were not Voldemort's, as well as make suggestions to that end.

"You know Dumbledore will be there."

Her statement bent a frown onto Harry's features, and he sighed. "Yeah, I know. I can't keep running though. Not forever." Picking up the robes he'd worn for the Will reading, Harry checked his wands, making sure the one he was supposed to own was visible, and Sirius' gift was stowed carefully on his arm, under the Disillusionment charm. "Besides. Sometimes it's best to hide in plain sight."

Tonks quirked her lip at that, "Would be easier if you had my talents, but a cunning plan won't hurt." Sighing and stretching the young witch leaned against the wall and regarded Harry quietly for a score of moments. Gone, to appearances was the young man she'd been guarding earlier that summer. Better food from their time in the Department of Mysteries, time spent doing something productive, active and useful to him, and the knowledge he had not only his own parent's history but that of his godfather before him seemed to give him... substance. Harry's brittle, uncertain manner had been replaced with a steady, if wary, confidence and solidity. He wasn't reacting anymore – he was planning. "Here's your pass," handing the small card to the wizard, she pinned her own to her robe. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." In truth he didn't need the pass, but the security of being the guest of Rufus would give him an extra layer of protection. His position as Lord Black allowed him to sit in, if not vote directly, on the Wizengamot gatherings. Looking to the small card, he blinked again at seeing his name, followed by the title "Lord Black". It would take some getting used to – provided he intended to keep it. Problem for another day.

Despite their faith and the good will Scrimgeour had promised, the two were taking pains to be prepared. Tonks also had acquired a backup wand, and had an invisibility cloak settled under her robes and shrunk it to the size of a scarf. Deactivated, it appeared as just that. One thing the former Auror wished they had still, were the small

charms that their unnamed benefactor in the Department of Mysteries had given them for their first foray into Gringott's. Smiling ruefully, she wondered how the Will reading would have gone if she had one on her person, when the Aurors had arrested her.

Asking herself what she'd do in such a case, she winced. Stun, petrify, search, bind and if needed, levitate charm the subject back, she reasoned. Perhaps one could be too prepared...

Password enchantments on the guest cards gave them access to the Ministry lobby Flooknet, and shortly the two were walking quickly – if uncertainly, toward the offices of one Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry took in the office, remembering how it was described to him. The first thing that seemed off to him, was the large mirror in the back, opposite the door and the odd placement of chairs, about the desk. Despite it, the room seemed immaculate and planned, both traits he could easily see in the man before them.

Greeting them both curtly, the Auror gestured for them to sit. Then, he erected a set of privacy wards so solid it made Harry's teeth ache. "I wanted to speak with you both today, after I'd gauged the waters from all the things to happen last night.

"First off, your disappearance wasn't noted or documented," nodding to Tonks, the man continued, before her curious look could evolve into words. "I've asked discreetly about any odd occurrences last night inside the Ministry, to those on shift who were aware and would be aware of your previous incarceration." Grinning wryly, the man leaned back in his chair. "Apparently, either my inquiry itself is being noted and possibly used against me, or I'm just slipping through the cracks. No one remembers you being arrested."

Her eyes going somewhat wide, Tonks turned to Harry to see him deep in thought. He spoke, but didn't look up, his mind still working, "So, they – whoever they is, are in the Ministry. Have access to the DMLE, and wouldn't be out of place being seen with Aurors or the legal and secretarial staff." Rufus nodded to all those points and in a moment, met the Aurors eyes. "No one else knows then?"

"It would seem that way."

"I see. Petrificus Totalis."

Her shock was only a small measure beside the Auror's apparent surprise when the spell struck him. Harry stood, and his wand was in hand, masking the fact of his wandless spell. "Too simple. Only you? You played right into this."

Rufus's eyes spoke volumes at Harry, and none of them were pleasant works. Tonks finally found her voice, "What are you doing? He's helping us Harry! Don't you see? Maybe he hadn't been Obliviated yet, maybe it's just a mistake, or he's too high profile!"

Shaking his head, Harry none the less kept his gaze fixed forward on the Auror. "Where are the copies of the arrest order?" Motioning with his eyes, the petrified man gestured to a certain stack on his desk. "Thank you."

Tonks was confused. Obviously this was going far afield what they'd discussed, planned and expected, but beyond that, Harry was acting totally outside her experience. What was he doing, thinking to assault an Auror, inside the Ministry no less? Looking back to him she noted two things, that broke her train of thought. One, he wasn't looking at Rufus, so much as the mirror, and two...

He was discreetly pointing to the door behind her with his left hand. Not waiting a moment, Tonks drew her wand and using a mild accio, pulled open the door that was just beginning to open.

The knob yanked free of their hand alerted the party behind the door, but that wasn't enough notice for them to react well enough to dodge a two stunners, a body-bind and a bludgeoning hex in rapid succession. Bloodied by the force of the concussion hex and his fall into the doorknob and room, Mad-Eye Moody lay, his magical eye spinning furtively about the room even as he lay unconscious.

"Good work, good work," Rufus said quietly, the appearance of the old Auror stunning even him, though he'd expected someone. This

someone, though was not what he'd thought to find. "I was hoping you would get the queues."

Tonks looked from her summer's companion to the Auror, to her long-time mentor and simply sat hard on the chair. "What just happened?"

Harry sat as well, as Rufus secured Moody in a chair, rebinding him, taking his wand and the three backups. "Not a trusting sort," he snorted, as the pile of items taken from the man grew on the table. "And I still don't trust he's got no tricks left."

Harry considered the man with a scowl. His expression promptly lightened. "Good, he probably does. I've an idea..."

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Moody awoke and quickly took stock of himself, before opening his eye. The first thing to come to note, was the lack of his magical eye, which immediately set him in a fouler (if possible) frame of mind. A score of breaths, timed to as to not alert his captors of his waking, passed as he realized he was nearly disarmed, but for a final holdout wand that he'd not expected to be found. English etiquette kept men from patting down each other's groin, and he'd yet to be disappointed in that choice of hiding spot, despite it's dangers.

His hands were bound behind him, but in what felt like warm ice – he could neither move his fingers nor feel the air of the room, and a kind of slippery hardness was the only sensation he could tell from touch. A body-bind held him in place on a chair, but that was typical. Little of his gear was still on his person, and from that, only the backup wand, a brace of emergency potions hidden in a small shrunken trunk between his false leg and stump (it still itched, so had to be there), and that device itself were still on him. Stock taken, Moody opened his good eye, and stifled a curse at what he saw.

Himself.

"Good to see you awake finally, Alastor."

"To hell with you." He'd have spat on the damned doppelganger had his mouth not gone dry as boomstraw immediately after seeing him.

One never really understands how seeing themselves make a malicious grin, one they'd not made, it not being in a mirror... how unnerving that is. Despite himself, his training, his experience, Moody shivered. "I'm in an odd situation here, Alastor. Aside from the obvious."

Staying silent, the veteran Auror kept his good eye forward, cursing the man, woman, whatever before him silently. Some dots began to connect, but only slightly. His image began again, shortly, "We have an office full of Aurors who don't know that someone's been pulling their strings. We have a veteran of the force with those stings in hand. So I have a few choices."

Moody was planning a simple sweep and clear. He'd dropped off the arrest order for Tonks – not his favorite choice of handling things, but Dumbledore had specifically needed her out of play. Moody wasn't about to kill the lass, so having her in the DMLE lockup for the next week as the fireworks behind Potter calmed would be the safest place for her – and her. Next day's paper made him wonder about that, as the Prophet had apparently hooked onto her already and the scapegoat play was in full force. Next step was to play a wait and see on Potter, but then Tonks had gotten stupid and escaped the DMLE, and complicated everything.

Now, not only was the arrest order in question, one that wouldn't hold up to even light scrutiny, but so was the entire situation. Forcing his hand, Moody had to work backwards and undo everything they'd done, and it started with Obliviating anyone that had come in contact with or was aware of Tonks' arrest. It was a chancy operation, and it took the better part of a day to do so, but he'd had two problems that he felt could be fixed easy enough.

One, Rufus Scrimgeour was not in his office, or about his usual haunts that day. Two, he'd picked up passes for not only himself, but a Harry Potter and Nymphadora Tonks that afternoon.

It was like they'd set themselves up for it. All three in a heavily warded room, in play where he could get them at once. A simple bit of work, quick Obliviation to the Director and a memory charm, another for Tonks and they'd be discussing her pension when they woke up, and Harry'd be back in Grimmauld before tea.

A scraping sound, like furniture being moved brought the Auror back to the present. What met his eye wasn't a welcome sight. "I see you're still familiar with this." How could he not be. He spent an entire year at Hogwarts, bound up inside the thing. There before him was the same damned trunk that Crouch Jr. had locked him into. His eye wide with memories and fear, the Auror turned instinctively away from the thing, back to his captor. "So, as I said. I have some choices."

"What do you want?" Moody's voice had gone quiet, and lost much of it's force.

A no less unpleasant smile lit the doppelganger's face. "I want some answers. You, will give them to me.

"Or, you get the box. And I get the answers myself."

Moody took a steadying breath and considered the options for a moment. He also considered the fact he still had his artificial leg, and that whoever it was across from him, and their partners as they had to have someone inside, hadn't roughed him up first to break down his resistance. "What do you want to know?"

"Who's side are you on?"

Not the question he'd expected, the man jerked up slightly. Before he could sputter a reply, his image continued, "You work against the supposed only person to be able to take down the Dark Lord, you purposefully cause an innocent to have to go to ground and ruin her life, you undermine the Ministry and it's workings. Don't try to play some moral high ground here – it won't work."

Admittedly, Moody had his own reservations about the whole situation, and others beyond those that the image before him pointed out. It was those questions, constant and nagging that kept the

former Auror up at night, and made it increasingly harder and harder to follow the Headmaster's instructions. "Side... one sometimes gets confused after a time, who works for who, and what goal each has."

Snorting, Moody's other self kicked the trunk, as if the veteran Auror needed a reminder of its presence. "Let's drop the pretense shall we? We have enough here to go two ways with this. You can be publicly demonized by a Wizengamot trial, with Veritaserum and forced to show who's hand this is."

"The other option?"

Meeting his one eye with their own, the image kept a neutral expression, "Help set things right yourself."

"As bad as him, and all his talk of second chances and people changing," Moody snorted, losing the tenseness that held him. "I don't care about setting things aright anymore, whoever you are. Harry. Tonks, Rufus. You can drop the facade. I'll help, just... can we stop this? I'm too old to play this game right now."

Standing with the help of a cane, the other him nodded tiredly. "Welcome back, Professor."

"You need to learn to search a man properly, Potter." Despite it, the older Auror smiled. Yes, that boy had potential.

The next two hours were spent quietly, as the four had tea over some of those answers they'd spoke of. "I'm sorry Tonks, I've gotten myself in this too deep to see right some days. It all started spiraling out of control after that madness at the DoM."

Tonks couldn't look at the man. Her mentor, her idol and friend, and the reason why she had lost everything she'd worked so hard for. "Why?"

"I could blame Dumbledore, but it wouldn't be right. I could blame Voldemort, but again, that's not all of it," heaving a sigh, Moody took a bracing drink of his tea and leaned back in the chair. "We're tied up

in the middle of a war that's destroying our world. After a while, the colors fade."

Harry made a short, angry motion. "That doesn't excuse this."

"No," shaking his head, Moody replied, "no it doesn't."

Rufus Scrimgeour checked the time as he went about the room, shrinking down the mirror on the wall back to its usual size. He'd hoped that Harry or Tonks would pick up on his subtle message, the warnings he'd given them, and they'd done so admirably. "So, Alastor, how can we fix this?"

Moody considered the man, supposedly one of the best hopes inside the Ministry to take the war to Voldemort and let his mind go back to when he was the one to hold that title. "First thing we do, is what you lot planned for this Wizengamot. After that... well that depends a lot on what young Potter here plans."

"What do you mean?" Annoyed at this last semi-answer, Harry turned to regard the man fully. "Why does it matter what my plans are?"

Barking a laugh, the old man couldn't help but chuckle after, at the young man's face. "For one, do you plan to take the fight the Dark Lord? Plan on letting Dumbledore take you back in, after this little show of defiance?" Waving down Harry's angry response, Moody continued, "you know this matters."

"I've been thinking, sure a few others with any sense have too. This war isn't getting any better. We're not trained, we don't have the people, the manpower to fight a hit and run guerrilla war. Terrorists." Looking at his tea, Moody's focus centered on the cup. "There isn't enough of us. Wizards. Our way of life isn't set up for that kind of attrition. Think about it." Moody stood and hobbled about, his eyes distant as he devoted himself to the explanation. "Our last census shows we have... three thousand wizards, there about. Of that, you have one hundred Death Eaters. Estimates."

Taking a pull from his flask, he sighed heavily and the smell of firewhiskey flooded the room. "You figure there are maybe thirty Aurors now, and under them another forty Hit Wizards."

"Only thirty?" Harry looked from Rufus to Moody and back dazedly. With a wooden nod the head of the Auror division confirmed Moody's numbers.

"After the Dark Lord went public the first time, many were killed, and many Aurors were directly targeted, or indirectly for opposing him." Taking off his small glasses, Rufus sighed and looked to the young wizard, "after then, the job hasn't been too popular."

Harry rubbed at his temples slowly.

Tonks laid a hand on his arm then, trying to ease the young man's mind, "Normally, with the contracts between wizards, and the way magic itself works there's little need for police, detectives. Oaths handle our need for truth and binding, seeking charms for detecting and finding."

It was Harry's turn to stand, and try to find some peace in motion. "Ever since Grindelwald, it's been getting worse. People die, but less wizards are born. How many of us were there, then?"

"Easily over five thousand in England alone."

Moody's answer only made Harry's thoughts darker still. "Yet still with the pureblood debate. Still with the Dark Lords and... does he want to rule an empty world? Idiot!" Kicking at the desk's leg, Harry swore and fell back into his chair.

"Power doesn't make them bright," Tonks said quietly in answer to Harry's outburst.

Looking up at Moody, Harry met the man's mismatched eyes and held them, once he'd let the thoughts of fools and dark wizards bleed from his mind. "You asked if this was a passing thing. No. I won't be Dumbledore's tool anymore. He may have defeated Grindelwald, he may be the most powerful wizard of our age, but I'm my own."

Running a hand over tired eyes, Harry's voice regardless held it's iron. "I will do what I have to. I will survive this, if only to spite both of those old arses."

Moody watched the young Potter for a moment, before bursting out in laughter, slapping his good knee. "Good, good! Then there's hope yet. But we need to be canny, and careful how we go about it.

"Right now, though, you have an appointment to keep," looking pointedly at Rufus, who nodded curtly. "I have a meddlesome old man to convince as well." Stopping for a moment as he stood, Moody considered a moment and looked to Tonks, "Say, I do believe one of your tricks may be of good use here."

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At the calling of attendance, the collected wizards of the Wizengamot took note of three odd things that afternoon. The first of course, was the attendance of the recently found Harry Potter and Nymphadora Tonks, as the guests of Rufus Scrimgeour. Guests in name, but the party sat in the long-since vacant Black House booth, which started many a whispered conversation. The second was the updated docket, now without the hastily penciled in hearing over the young witch's role in Harry's disappearance. The third of these was the seeming stormcloud over a certain Mugwump, piquing everyone's interest. These things managed somehow to trump the docket itself, being the appointment of an interim Minister and the sentencing of a number of Death Eaters.

Dumbledore had entered the chambers with a look of serene detachment, his usual face for politics. It was useful, in that his presence was felt, but it seemed he was above all the menial proceedings of government. This added, he felt, to his air and semblance of neutrality. Harry's cheeky wave and blown kiss from his vantage shattered that like so many of his instruments the months prior.

Harry was sure, if Moody were in attendance, Dumbledore's basilisk stare would have struck the man down where he stood.

The period of milling about and muttering pointlessly that all political gatherings entertained was cut short by the Sonorus enhanced call to order of the Chief Warlock. "This emergency session of the Wizengamot will come to order. This being the first day of the eighth month of the Queens forty-fourth year of ascendancy, nineteen-hundred and ninety six Gregorian. Merlin give us guidance. God save the Queen."

Echoing, yet muted replies of 'God save the Queen' met his closing, much to Harry's befuddlement. Though he'd been on trial once here, it was a rushed, impromptu thing and had little of this air of organization. Suddenly a number of things said at the reading of his Godfather's will made sense. So far, at least.

Before tonight, he'd assumed that the Wizengamot had a structure much like the one he'd seen when on trial for defending himself from Dementors. Through his meeting with Rufus and Moody, he'd gotten a brief rundown and abbreviated set of notes on the usual byplay and system by which the government of wizards worked.

"Harry," leaning aside so not to draw too much attention, Rufus cast his voice just loud enough to be heard, "When the chair, that being Dumbledore tonight, calls for new business, place your hand on the center of the gray stone here." Pointing to the front of their booth, Harry was reminded of the odd little pillars of rock that had been apparent in all the House booths they'd passed. Only one per booth was evident, but below their row, dominated by these booths, many chairs also held them. "They can only be activated by those with a House ring, or a Petitioner's ring, or in your proxy's case, a Proxy's ring. The stones are set to recognize those as votes and triggers, and will only respond to activated ones. Tonight, since you have assumed your Lordship, you will have your full votes available to you, but by the end of one month, will need to assign those to others."

Harry had been wary of hearing that his assumption of title had effectively canceled the voting rights of those previously holding them, but was reassured when the names were given, and at least three of

the family names were those of Death Eaters. Never mind the possibility that some were literally being tried and voted on by their relatives, as long as political lines maintained the flow of power, those in power would continue to rule with it. It started making much more sense to Harry what Rufus wanted him to see, as he sat in the Black booth, his former proxies arranged now with inert rings in the petitioner's row as spectators. Through his musing, he caught the enhanced voice of the Headmaster booming among them again.

"As this is a special meeting, I urge all present to maintain civility and keep their issues prompt. There is much to be done today. That said, I open the floor to new pleas and issue." A pause, as a number of sigils and house crests appeared on his podium, arranging themselves by weight. Rufus elbowed Harry with an amused smirk, as Dumbledore's eyes snapped to the young man. He'd been nervous at the explanation of how his votes were cast and counted, till Rufus reminded him of two things in their rushed meeting earlier.

"Government is a power struggle, first and foremost," Rufus had explained to them. "It struggles to keep the power it has, and add to it. Like water collecting on glass, it will in time pool. Power has a gravity of its own." His voting pool, no longer spread among his proxies, would be condensed till he named new ones. In that month interim, there would be no House or seat, other than the Mugwump himself, that could supersede him in either bringing up new issues, or speaking to the floor. Though he hadn't the Potter seats, those still being in Albus's care, his coagulate vote was stronger than any single proxy. This also ensured that House issues, before the split of proxy and the assumption of those, took high priority. This seemed to thrill the young man, as he rose, grudgingly acknowledged by the Mugwump.

"The floor acknowledges Lord Black."

The second of Rufus's points became clear at the silent yelling going on all around him, the magical blanket of a room-wide silence charm in effect. When someone had the floor, and it was not a vote or debate, the room was obliged to hear. Even if they didn't want to. "I go on record tonight, assuming my votes and privileges, granted me by blood, law and right, on behalf of the Ancient House of Black."

Dumbledore seemed to have found something distasteful in his mouth, by his appearance. "The Wizengamot honors your claim."

That on its own seemed to negate half the need for the charm. Nearly a third of the room went still, and those others seemed to hesitate uncertainly. It was, after all, the Mugwump's role to challenge and verify all claimants to House privilege, and here there wasn't so much as a hesitation on Dumbledore's part! What was this madness? Harry scanned the room again, seeing thoughtful looks on a number of faces, among those his new found ally Amelia Bones. With a grin he returned the smile that her daughter, Susan offered, obviously there to learn from her aunt as well. "Rufus, what is your opinion of Amelia?"

"Madam Bones?" The man's went distant for a moment, as he nodded quietly, "she is a brilliant woman, dedicated, talented. A fighter. Also, one of my opponents, in the position for Minister."

Taken aback somewhat, Harry looked from the stern woman back to the man at his side. "I don't-"

"I will clarify. Since her appointment as head of the DMLE, my superior, she has reformed the department. The Auror division has prospered, and we are in the middle of reforms that will remake the office." Smiling slightly, Rufus spared Harry's incredulous confusion with a grin. "Bluntly – she's too good to lose. I expect her to turn down the offer. We need her too much where she is, and she knows it."

Blinking owlshly, Harry gained a bit more respect from the man beside him. He wasn't fully aware of the hierarchy in the Ministry, the rank and file, but to hear that Rufus was competing against his superior – to keep her where she was needed, seemed to strike a tone with him.

"She is a great woman, Harry," Tonks offered, nodding to Amelia as their glances seemed to garner her notice. The other woman seemed to consider them a moment, before smiling impishly. "She's really doing great things here. With Fudge out of the way, and a good Minister to get things moving, I think they can do some good."

Absorbing as much as he could, Harry nodded as a number of other issues were brought to light. Little caught his attention, really. Most of the 'new business' were small grievances, petty bills and stupid time-wasting attempts, Rufus informed him. Actually, the man's muttering were more informative in this case than his direct observations to Harry, which amused the young man greatly.

He voted on the small issues hesitantly, using the yes and no faces of his stone marker for those purposes. When a vote was cast, the sigil of his House on the booth would light either red or blue, for the appropriate response. This, he assumed, would allow non-discussed issues to see their allies and enemies for purposes of stymieing or coordination. Such was confirmed by Scrimgeour.

Nearly an hour and a half into the Wizengamot, the actual docket was returned to. "We will now begin the hearing for the accused, in regard to situations occurring barely more than a month ago, June eighteenth."

Dumbledore's words shocked and settled around Harry like a dense fog. Has it really been so short a time, he asked himself. Looking back over the brief time in Privet this summer, his abbreviated stay in the Department of Mysteries, and now this, the day after his birthday, and he had to admit, it was still very, very fresh to him, the memories of that night. Stuffing aside his initial impulse to begin thinking of Sirius and his death, how it still ached and tore at him, Harry instead focused on his responsibilities – and role in today's proceedings. Hopefully this would allow some justice for his lost Godfather.

Into the central room were marched the eleven Death Eaters involved in the Battle. Though Harry had been spirited away rather quickly afterward, the postures, attitude and overall aura of the people there set him on edge. Still in their black robes, they also had, when one's hands were lifted, a bright orange armband, around their right wrists. "Rufus, what are those?"

The head of the Auror office noticed his gaze and nodded slightly, "Anti-portkey and Apparition wards. A nasty piece of work backward-

engineered by the DoM. Won't let the wearer use any kind of magical travel or be subject to it. Doing so would be somewhat... messy."

At the word messy, Harry found he was feeling a bit better about tonight.

"Please state your names."

The first Death Eater to stand was Lucius Malfoy, who's eyes seemed to search out people in the stands fervently. When his eyes met those of Harry, the man's manicured and refined face broke into a hateful snarl. Swallowing back whatever he'd wanted to say, the man let his gaze sweep around once more, before settling back on the Mugwump. "I invoke the Act of Altonsis, clause four."

Murmurs spread about the room, as Rufus sat back with a satisfied grin. They'd expected this and planned accordingly, but to see the man, supposedly a rather adept political manipulator, fall so easily into a trap made Harry stifle a giggle. Tonks, beside him, had less control. Luckily their booth only allowed sound in, when Harry's ring was not on the stone.

Dumbledore seemed to have expected this as well. "Very well. Under the Act, you may withhold stating your name till proof of the deed accused has been verified." The downside, for Lucius, in this ploy was that now the proceedings were locked up on him, and not his 'friends'. Until they could say, decidedly, what charges against him were in fact proven, he would not go on record as a defender. Harry thought the law stupid and set to protect pureblood bigotry, which was only affirmed by Rufus. Luckily, Lucius was playing well into their own plans.

As the floor was arranged for a hearing more specific to a trial, with evidence and counterargument, Harry placed his hand on the stone, alerting the podium to his needs. Dumbledore's voice, cast now through his own stone, reached him and him alone. "Yes, Harry? What can I do for you?"

"High Mugwump, please address me with the respect of position we both share. Unless you prefer me to refer to you in such familiar

terms to the floor." This too was rehearsed, and it was all Harry could do to restrain his mirth in the light of Dumbledore's obvious irritation. He could see the man's color rising from here.

"Very well, Lord Black. What do you require of the floor?"

Schooling his features, the young man placed the items in his hand to the small stone bowl beside the pillar. "In accordance with the Act of Altonsis, I offer evidence and in turn would like to bind my name to the list of claimants duress."

"Harry, this is-"

"Albus." The cold tone of Harry's voice snapped the old wizard's attention his way, away from the podium. Other stares followed, most showing uncertainty. Harry noted idly, that Amelia was watching him intently.

A very long moment passed, as the Headmaster seemed to lose some of the tension in his posture. "Very well, Lord Black."

Scrimgeour and he had hammered out a few scenarios, before the meeting. The intent of those being not just seeing those responsible, to Harry, of killing his Godfather see justice, but also to show a precedent for intolerance for Death Eaters and the others loyal to Voldemort's cause. As it stood, Scrimgeour let it be known that because the Aurors aligned with Dumbledore had acted in vigilantism, that none of their testimony could be held as evidence. Only that of a full witness in their majority could be used, and though Scrimgeour had arranged for a number of Harry's DA friends to be available for call on this, the Boy-Who-Lived and his reputation, as well as political clout now, could be much, much more useful. There would be some contest in regard to their own roles in this – but with the evidence Harry provided, little else could be done. What it boiled down to for Harry, disregarding the wording, the complex dance and evasion of politics and law, was this: now that Lucius had invoked the Act, if the acts attributed to him could be proven, witnessed and attributed to him, he'd get the Veil.

Harry's lips lifted incrementally. There was also another lovely loophole, or noose as Rufus had called it, that allowed for what they'd do tonight. Grinning down at the floor and those bound there, Malfoy being their keystone and bankroller, made this so easy.

Proceedings went quickly, and it became evident that Lucius's ploy was simply that, political posturing. He'd expected and banked on the majority his wife's votes would get him, had banked on his name, reputation alone and connections to get him out of this. Assumptions seemed to be his enemy tonight. The Pensieve memory combined with wand residue signature and the testimony of Harry Potter nullified his reliance on the Act to protect him.

The jaws were closing. Time to trip the second set.

"Motion to offer the accused a reduced sentence, in return for information," almost on cue, one of the lesser Houses gave them exactly what they needed.

Harry placed his hand on the stone to second the motion. After, he placed it on the call face to gain the floor.

"Motion passed. You have the floor, Lord Black."

Standing Harry looked to Lucius and grinned slowly. "Accused, the floor asks you to identify the method by which your peers, named "Death Eaters", are marked, and identified."

Conspiracies are ugly things. They get complicated when madness and paranoia start taking over. The illegality of the Dark Mark had never been established, mostly in that such a thing was never placed in the Wizengamot's court. Harry planned to change that.

Lucius waffled for a moment before Amelia, seeing what was about to happen, motioned for the use of Veritaserum. Murmuring about the floor took on a somewhat frantic tone, as many tried to dispute the need for the potion. Was not the mask and cloak the calling card of the Death Eater? No majority could be called upon to strike the motion. Many were eying those that voted against it's use warily.

This also played into their overall plan quite nicely. "Lord Black, would you like to add something?"

"Floor requests that the accused be asked questions pertinent to possible further investigations by the DMLE while under the serum."

Worried murmuring had rising to somewhat strident concern now. Would names be given? Who would Lucius use to buy his freedom? Again, the Wizengamot's majority worked against Malfoy.

Three drops later, and the fun began. Harry placed the queries he would have voiced in the bowl, as they were magicked away to the podium. A number of others were appearing in the bin as well, sheafs of parchment in fact. A DMLE proxy went through the paperwork, validating and discarding any illegal or useless queries. Shortly, the inquiry began.

"Lucius Malfoy, please identify for the floor the method by which Death Eaters identify one another."

Malfoy's usual haughty sneer was missing, but his tone still held mild derision. "We all bear the Dark Mark."

"Identify this Mark."

Lucius lifted his arm, bearing the black tattoo on his forearm, a mirror of the Mosmordre sign, that all were familiar with. "Floor identifies the Dark Mark as an act of collusion among those loyal to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Lucius Malfoy, please verify those with you in the Department of Mysteries are all Death Eaters."

A moment passed as the man turned to look at his compatriots. "Yes."

Other questions were asked, most trivial. Some required to know his political connections, who he knew. Few were specific enough to make any cases against... until.

"Malfoy, please verify the source of the money used, the majority, that fund the actions of the Death Eaters."

"My own."

"Malfoy, are those branded with the Dark Mark asked to contribute something to the Dark Lord's cause?"

Nodding, the blonde man accepted that and agreed. "Yes."

The wording was intentionally vague, for a reason. Rufus looked to Harry and smiled a predator's smile. "We have them."

The other questions were moot, to Harry. He only had a few more things to say, tonight, before this circus could be put to the back of his mind. He was well aware that the man beside him was using him as a political crutch, a figurehead for his own ends. What difference, Harry reasoned, when their ends were the same? One had to disagree to be used, for it to carry such negative connotations. Otherwise, it was simply cooperation.

"The witness will not be able to answer effectively past the point," the DMLE proxy stated, as the man in the chair seemed to be blinking lazily, shaking his head slowly.

Nodding, Dumbledore looked between the two booths where he could identify the handwriting of questions that were pressing at his mind dangerously. What game was the boy playing? Or was it Scrimgeour's? He also realized that Amelia was another player, beyond her role at the Will reading. "Evidence has been placed into the records. The floor recognizes Amelia Bones."

Harry had decided to wait this time, fearing that spearheading too many motions would garner him too much ire in the soon to come Minister votes – not that he expected his view to be very popular anyway. Still, he would place his own agenda there, if needed. Surprisingly, it was Madam Bones that had taken the initiative in this case. "Motion to enact the anti-conspiracy and collusion Acts of 1982, specifically clause "C". I quote, "If it is proven that parties identifiable as part of an organization, and that that organization's goal it is to commit acts detrimental to the proper working of society, falling under

the felony code of the DMLE, can be tried as a body for that organization. All actions taken against such body, are then hereby enacted against their members, if they can be proven by law to have contributed or acted in the interest of such a body." House Bones rests."

Harry couldn't help himself, and smiled at the woman. She'd done the work for him, this time. The law was simple: if you could be legally bound to a company, group or party that was committing laws against the wizarding world, then it became that group that was charged, not the individuals. It was a dangerous law, one that was rarely used, only once in history and then only in the event of a nasty set of business takeovers involving Unforgivables. Here though, it posed a unique opportunity. Harry placed his hand on the stone, and wearily Dumbledore called his name.

"Motion to move forward, with the charges of murder, acts of collusion and conspiracy to commit terrorism, acts..." Harry went on, basically calling up all the singular acts and charges against Lucius he'd already confessed to, under the assumption he'd have his own sentencing. Then, such things would be bought off easily enough, by placing blame on others, by money, or political power.

Personally, those would work. The Death Eaters themselves, as a group, had no legal clout, or representation.

It would be known later as the single largest group execution in the history of the Ministry. All eleven Death Eaters would be Veiled, as acting in party to the Dark Lord, and all the charges leveled ultimately against him being then carried out as a collective charge against those in his 'organization'. The precedent was clear – take his Mark, and if you were caught, you would die. No trip to Azkaban, no holding cell for a trial. The Dark Mark had become a death sentence.

After the motion had cleared, there was little sense of security in the halls, despite having had eleven of the most dangerous criminals currently known sent to their death. Too much had happened today, to leave those in the position of leadership secure. Most had come in expecting a slap on the wrist trial, knowing well that Malfoy's political ties, previously cementing his majority in the Wizengamot along with

other supporters and the occasional favor and neutrality would see him released. They did not expect that release to be into the Veil.

Calling the floor's muttering to order, Dumbledore moved on to the docket item. "We will now hear nominations for the position of interim Minister, who will fulfill the obligations and expectations of the Minister until the next elections."

Booth lights lit in various places about the room, and with the collective proxy of all his votes centralized, Harry's booth was called first. "Lord Potter, your nominee?"

He knew there would be little surprise in his answer, but still it did his heart good to see the Headmaster rankle at his words. "Rufus Scrimgeour."

Dumbledore recognized another, who seconded his motion. Shortly, another nominee, Madam Bones was offered. There were others, but the nominations were given seemingly in a haphazard fashion, as if the orchestra had lost their conductor and the players had decided on their own tunes. Perhaps it was the earlier motions condemning Death Eaters to the death they touted. People were nervous, and beginning to look out for themselves, now.

Madam Bones took the floor briefly, refusing the nomination and asking her supporters to endorse Scrimgeour, as she would be doing. That caused somewhat of a stir as the two active faces working with the DMLE tonight had both placed their bets with Rufus. Many had considered Amelia the obvious choice, but now there seemed to be a rhyme to the two's action.

Within the hour, Harry was sitting with the interim Minister, listening as Dumbledore closed the Wizengamot, without mention of Tonks or his own state. Pity, Harry was beginning to enjoy his short stint as official pain in the ass.

The three met back in Scrimgeour's offices, along with a somewhat disheveled Moody. Looking about furtively, he drew his wand as Tonks, Harry and Rufus entered, still riding the high from their own successes. Tonks had escorted them, under the guise as a personal

guard to Harry, and the trio had managed to dodge the publicity and pounce that had gathered to congratulate, question and stare at the pair that had set the Wizengamot on its ear. The highlight of her night was staring down Dumbledore as the men behind her entered a lift, as he tried to gain Harry's attention.

They quietly took seats in the room, as Moody shifted his attention from one to the other, his demeanor somewhat uncertain. "What is this all about?"

"Did you receive your letter?"

Nodding jerkily, the veteran Auror flattened it out on the table, but kept his wand at the ready. "Not often I get mail from myself," gesturing, he looked hard at Tonks as she slowly pulled a compact from her pocket.

Nodding quietly, Harry leaned forward and got a face full of wand, but didn't flinch. "It's OK Moody. You're with friends here. But I know that won't convince you. I expect you're wondering why you wrote yourself that?"

"Oh I'm rather certain why. Old man's been messing with my head, reckon," to hear Moody call anyone else old felt surreal, but then again, it left no argument on his target. Harry simply nodded again, as Tonks slid the compact onto the letter and leaned back, her hands visible the entire time.

Moody took the thing carefully and with a few diagnostic charms, popped it open to reveal a single, thick strand of silvery memory. Taking it up on wandpoint, he favored them all with a fierce glare, as if warding off any action till he'd assimilated his own recollections.

A few long moments passed, until the veteran relaxed and seemed to settle back into his previous expression, the one they'd left the room with hours ago. "Old bastard has no idea who he's messing with."

Tonks laughed happily, jumping up to give her mentor a long-awaited hug.

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A/N: There aren't many people out there that can make me feel like taking back up an abandoned project, and following through on it. Though she may not realize it, Khaleda is my eternal inspiration. And no. She's not in this fandom.

Chapter Eleven

An armed society is a polite society. Manners are good when one may have to back up his acts with his life.

– Robert A. Heinlein quotes

Slumping into a chair, Harry Potter regarded the other people in the room with him tiredly. "I have no idea why you want to be a part of that."

Rufus Scrimgeour chuckled, before taking his own seat at the desk they were milling about. Masking his scrutiny behind the cleaning of his glasses, he looked to the happy reunion of the former Auror, Tonks, and her mentor Alastor Moody. The two had been rather terse with one another before the Wizengamot, but that had seemed to evaporate now that he was with them after the event. Replacing his glasses, the newly appointed Minister cleared his throat quietly. "Yes well, it's not the best game in town, but it's what I know."

Laughing, Harry conceded the point with a nod. "You can have it. I do need to know though, if you can help me place people I can trust into those positions, my proxies." Shaking his head, Harry leaned back in his chair to rub at tired eyes.

At this, Rufus shook his head, looking pensive, "I don't know if that would be proper, or even a good idea, Harry."

Before Harry could question the man, Moody spoke up, "He's right. You've already singled yourself out as his primary supporter, turning around and having his political backers as your proxy votes would alienate the few sections of the Wizengamot that are neutral. Nothing purebloods hate more than being herded."

Considering the idea, Harry frowned. "What should I do then?"

"No doubt Dumbledore would assure you that he could help here," Tonks said with an edge to her voice. After their talk with Moody, her opinions and views of the man had steadily been on the decline. Currently, she was not feeling exceptionally kind in regard to the Headmaster. "I suppose what you'd need more than anything is

someone you can trust, who's got solid connections and experience with politics."

Harry snorted at that. "You used the words politics and trust in a sentence."

Rolling her eyes, Tonks turned to her seat as well. "The fact remains. Who do we know, other than Rufus, that we can lean on this way?"

The empty silence was answer enough. Harry considered those he knew, and with Rufus now suddenly out of the loop for possible recommendations, the possibilities weren't stellar. "Madam Bones?"

Rufus shook his head, "Not the kind to make connections. She's a career Auror, and even if she had the connections, I think her position in the DMLE would be more alienating than mine."

Nodding, Harry had to admit she seemed formidable in the small time he witnessed her in the Wizengamot and outside it. That air didn't lend itself to the kind of interactions one needed as a politician, and accordingly, she was rarely seen in company other than Aurors or her niece. Though he needed someone to fill that role, he didn't think less of Madam Bones for her lack of suitability, in fact it only raised his opinion. "She'll do good things for the Ministry."

"I plan on making sure she'll do good things for all of us," Rufus countered, conjuring a glass of water. "She's the brightest and most focused person on the DMLE staff. We need her to be there, keeping the peace."

"Agreed, she's got her head on right," Moody's endorsement made Harry smile, and he leaned back to consider his options.

Shaking his head, already at a loss for other allies, he had to remember his recent enemies. How many politicians did he know? Dumbledore for one, seemed the most prolific. Behind him, was Fudge. Beyond those obvious movers on the political arena, the others were in Voldemort's camp, Malfoy being the most obvious of those he knew, just took a dive face-first into the Veil.

One of the Malfoy's...

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"Harry, do you really think this is a good idea?"

Laughing nervously to himself, the young man had to shake his head.
"Honestly? Probably not one of my most well thought out plans."

Tonks paled slightly. "Considering what I've heard of those, I'm not reassured."

Taking up the glass of water on the table before him, Harry had to agree. "I don't know if I can trust her. But, after that episode in Gringott's, and the way she acted, I suppose it's worth a shot. She seemed more loyal to the House of Black than anything else."

"Aunt Narcissa's loyalties, Harry, are not the kind of things I'd bank the wizarding world's future on."

He had considered her past. But he also had to take into consideration that despite it all, she'd also be looking out for her own future. He had a very good idea, that given her current position and that of her recently executed husband, the woman would make the choice for her own livelihood. "I have to ask though... how do you plan on contacting her? After all that happened in the Wizengamot, she's not likely to just take an owl post or a casual visit."

Biting his lip in thought, Harry nodded. "I may know a way. But I'll need to think about it a bit more."

Tonks nodded, and stood to look out over the balcony. 93 Diagon alley, the recently empty shop front that they both knew would shortly be the colorful entrance to Fred and George's new shop. Above that store, like many others, was living space and apartments, this one in particular had been considered by the twins, and with a little nudge, Harry had picked it up as a temporary safe house. Probably after they left, the two Weasleys would take over the lease.

After his whirlwind summer, the idea of something so domestic and normal as leasing and staying in an apartment made him feel somewhat awkward. It wouldn't be a bad thing, he reasoned, laying and looking up at the ceiling. He just wasn't familiar with such things, didn't know how to react. He was familiar with the give and take of dealing with Voldemort. Like knowing the blow to his cabal of Death Eaters would only incense him, push him to deeper darkness, worse acts of terror. Still, it's not like Harry could just let them go back into the world. This is the battle he knew, not the one behind votes and alliances.

Balance. There was no such thing, in war or peace. People couldn't sit by and be satisfied with equality. The idea that one could be better than another, made them strive to put themselves above their peers. Never was it, "I want to be equal to this," it was ever "I want to be better". Perhaps there was a lesson there, in regard to wizards....

Putting away his idle musing, Harry thought back to the Will, the reading and the things that went on before and after. How at the Blooding, he'd touched another kind of magic, something as new to him as the idea itself when he was eleven. He wondered how many other aspects of magic he'd stumble on in his life, but this one held something that could be key to his problem. When he'd opened himself up to the magic, one of the things that had scared him was how intimately he'd felt all those people the magic also touched. That idea had taken root, that there was this fundamental connection in the magic of the House itself that bound them, in more ways than a name. The ceremony he'd underwent had only strengthened this idea. What had Narcissa called it? Law? That seemed an odd way to refer to such a thing.

Settling in his bed, he tried to call on what focus he had to calm the whirlwind in his mind. There was a lot going on, sure, during the reading yet the focus of that moment helped him keep it centered. Here and now that focus was escaping him. Too much had happened over the last-

The sounds of Tonks settling her things added one more note in the chorus that was his distraction. Sighing he thought to cast a silencing

charm but stilled, realizing this was how the world was. It was the same as his dorm. The same as the Dursleys. There were other people, those either near him, or close to him in other ways, that also depended on him. Sure it was different with each. Tonks though had put a lot of her own life on the line for him. The least he could do, was not mess up something he'd accidentally done once already.

Letting himself go, Harry felt his scar briefly flare in pain then dull as suddenly, as that feeling of... gravity dragged at him. Against what Dumbledore had cautioned him, Harry dropped his shields, and he found himself again spinning among the halls of Grimmauld. The blood in him, that idea that Narcissa called Law pulled his sense of self away, spun it like spiderweb across the city. Gathering his wits and focus, Harry pushed at the feeling, the perceptions. He was still in the flat above the Twins' shop, but he realized, that part of him always would be tied to those other places, things. Tied to the magic that defined the bloodline Black and its responsibilities to it. As he acclimatized to the peculiar sensation of being made of house and earth, before the voices started speaking to him, Harry focused on one voice, one idea.

Narcissa.

With a jolt he was... staring across the room, but not his, at a finely decorated dressing table and through a light cream haze of drapery around a bed much like that at his dorm. The canopy was above him, and as his vision fixed more solidly on the idea of Narcissa, the sensation of riding behind someone else's eyes sharpened.

"Lord, Harry, easy... if you push too hard you may black me out," her voice echoed oddly, and he realized it was Narcissa, and that he was looking out of her eyes. That peculiar echo was the sound of her voice, heard through her own ears. The sensation made him shudder, the alien nature of being displaced was more acute than the bystander aspect of a Pensieve even. "Relax. I take it you've never touched blood Law before."

Unsure how to answer, he stayed silent. Narcissa took a moment to shift some errant hair from her field of vision and slid from beneath the sheets of her bed. "I'm surprised you managed so strong a link,

any at all really, so soon. Even my grandfather could not do so, this strongly.

"Ah of course, you don't know how to answer. I can hear you buzzing, like voices in a crowd in my mind, but all with your tone. Focus – but not too hard! You're strong, don't over do it. I like my mind in one piece. Just focus on what you would say to me." She seemed done with her explanation then, and to Harry's shock, was standing before the large, full body mirror he'd spied from his first vantage.

It of course wasn't the mirror that stunned him nearly back into his own skull but the rather sheer and quite short chamise that the former Lady Malfoy seemed to enjoy sleeping in. "Ah yes. From that reaction I can guess your relationship with my errant niece is not... solid." Smirking slightly, she pulled a dressing robe about her shoulders, obscuring his view of her form. Idly he wondered if he should point out, that he could only look where she did, as his field of view lingered some time on her rather distracting assets. He'd acknowledged her to be pretty some time ago, but the constant sneer or her attitude dulled the impact of it severely. Now, faced with her without any... buffers it was obvious that she took exceptional care of herself for one just over forty years of age. Chuckling, the woman tied the robe about herself loosely. "So, other than the inspection of my form, what can I help you with this evening?"

Regathering himself, the young wizard tried to focus on the idea he'd considered. The result was an exasperated sigh. "I'm not some silly familiar, to impress images as if charades upon. Speak."

"Sorry," his impulsive answer came, and the woman's expression softened. "Ah, so it does work this easily."

Nodding, Narcissa crossed to her sitting table and rested in the chair there, "Better. Perhaps a more modest view will not distract you so." His mixed disappointment and agreement make her laugh peal out quietly.

More at ease, Harry tried again, "I wanted to speak with you, regarding the Wizengamot."

The softness in her features blurred quickly, and Harry realized how... tactless this meeting was. To confront and try to gain her assistance so soon after essentially sentencing her husband to death. "Do not worry, Lord." Taking a steadying breath, the woman seemed to draw in at herself, as if expecting some blow. "Tell me what you need of me."

"I need allies."

A small smile seemed to curve the woman's lips. "So, you need my help."

Screwing up his courage, Harry replied with an affirmative. "I need to find someone that I can trust. Someone to help with the appointments of proxies and the handling of all this... madness with the Wizengamot."

"And what makes you think you can trust me, Lord?"

In a way, he knew that a normal answer to this wasn't possible. That what he knew was illogical and made little sense. Narcissa, despite her previous loyalties and her marriage could be trusted, at least by him. The answer wasn't anything he could say, so much as felt. "I just know. How do I know?"

"It's called Law. It's a magic that dwells in things, like old homes, old blood. It's a binding, an agreement between magic and those that keep it," smiling quietly, the woman picked up a brush from her dressing table and began straightening her tresses. "I spoke of it at the reading. Do you understand it, Lord?"

"I don't really. But I'm trying."

Narcissa smiled, but the gesture never reached her eyes. "It is a start. For some reason, my dear cousin decided you should be the one to take up the name Black. Sadly, the man did nothing to prepare you for this. And, to be honest, I'm not sure I'm up to the significant task." Laying the nearly neglected brush aside, Narcissa looked at herself, looked through herself in the mirror to the young man on the other side. "But that is not why you contacted me, is it young Lord? No,

tonight, let us speak of alliances, politics, and the machinations of man."

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"You planning to layabout all day, Lord Black?" Jolted awake, Harry kicked at the comforters and blankets, before opening his eyes to the room and day. A head peeking around the door, a faint fall of pink hair and an impish grin met his bleary gaze. Reaching over and taking up his glasses, Harry blinked again at the light seeping through the drawn windows and tried to press sense against his skull, hoping it would break through into the rest of his mind.

Shaking his head with a rub to his eyes, Harry spared the young witch a smile as she backed to her own room, giving him his privacy. It was many minutes as the day, and more importantly the night, caught up with him that Harry remembered fully the conversation that he'd had the night before. He'd used that tie to the blood of seek out Narcissa... ah.

He had much to do. "Tonks!"

Summoning his clothes, the young man was a hurricane of motion and sudden waking awareness. Much was going on, and the sooner it was done, the more likely it would be. Banging open the door with a startled look, Tonks once more expected to look on a lazy young man, but instead found Harry practically storming about, tossing things into a trunk, settling his wands... "Harry what's up?"

"We have things to do. I don't have a lot of time, and we need to go see your aunt later, so-"

"Wait, wait!" Blinking confusedly, the witch held up her hands trying to ward off the frenetic motion Harry seemed locked into. "My aunt? I can only assume you mean Narcissa, but we talked about this last night, you don't just..." she trailed off as the young man just smiled at her and went on with his packing, putting some files from their earlier work into a single trunk. "Are you listening to me?"

Nodding, Harry breezed by her and with his new wand set the breakfast to organizing itself hurriedly. Snatching a slice of toast from the whirl of cooking food, he nibbled at it while pulling on his boots. "I talked with her last night, we came to an agreement-

"Talked to her? Last night?" Looking dumbstruck, the metamorph snatched her own toast and sat across from Harry. "What are you talking about?"

Harry stalled, realizing he was going off feet first again, and winced. "Sorry, it'd take too long to explain. I just need to do this, and you'll see why soon. Just trust me a bit longer. Can you do that?"

Pursing her lips, Tonks looked from Harry, toast half eaten and still stuck between his teeth, shoes half tied and robe looking like he slept in it, with all it's mess. "Alright Harry. But I expect a long, detailed explanation after this. Preferably before Remus gets back from the Shack."

"Yeah, I can do that," pulling his robes into some semblance of order, Harry seemed to focus on something strongly a moment, and for a brief second Tonks felt... unease. It was like something oily slid along her hand for a fraction of a moment. "We need to move fast. I need to go by the Ministry, and then we can go see your aunt."

Tonks did not like being left out of the planning process. This screamed 'stupid' to every thing she'd learned from her training for the Auror division. Hell it went against common sense too. Yesterday, Harry had witnessed against Lucius, and not a handful of days before that, crossed Narcissa at the will reading. What could he be thinking? "Alright, give me a few minutes to prepare."

Prepare they did. Obviously Harry wasn't walking into this lightly, as before they left the small loft he'd had her try and summon his wands, check him for any weaknesses in his preparation, and then recheck. He'd insisted on doing the same for her, and after it all, they put on the gray, formless cloaks and set out to the Ministry.

Arriving, they had to take normal visitor's passes as on a non-Wizengamot day, his presence wasn't needed. Though his position was one of influence, sure, he wasn't an employee of the Ministry. So, like Tonks, he picked up his pass and hurried into the Ministry, checking the directory quickly on the way. As usual, his presence caused a stir, but unlike the usual sick sense of attention he got, Harry just pushed through the press and questions and stares. He didn't have time for this. "Deeds and titles... ah, there. C'mon."

Slipping into her Auror mode, Tonks kept a close eye on anyone that paid them any undue attention. Or any at all, as they passed quickly beyond the atrium and it's outlandish fountain, and then into the lift. It was a somewhat surreal sensation, going back into the Ministry, so long through other ways and means, but this time simply coming in as any other wizard would. Harry made a note to use front doors more often. "Tonks, you know about how I can't keep the Black title, and take up my own, right?"

Tonks nodded without taking her attention away from scanning and checking their surroundings. "I think our Goblin friend covered that during our research. Harry what are you planning – head down, that's Arthur." Doing as she said, the young man only assumed she used her skills to be unrecognizable to the Weasley patriarch. They passed one another without incident. Harry was mildly shocked at how well she took to the role of bodyguard, but he reasoned after it was silly. The entire Order had been taking that role off and on since his knowledge of them.

Without further incident, the pair made it to the Titles office, and Harry went about asking for the proxy forms, and to Tonks' shock, a binding contract letting those within a House abdicate their claim to another of the same bloodline. Fearing that maybe he was under some curse, she still kept an eye on him, watching his back rather than jumping to conclusions. He asked her to trust him, that he'd explain. She'd give him time to do so. Despite it, they were going to have words on why it wasn't bright to leave her out of the loop, very, very soon.

Discreetly shrinking and stowing the forms, the pair made their way out again without incident, only clearing as far as the Apparition wards before Harry indicated it was time. With a crack, the pair

appeared on the path to Malfoy Manor, outside the stately building's ward zone. Hesitantly, Tonks looked to him one last time before sending the announcement charm, a kind of doorbell for wizards into the wards. Shortly a house elf came to where they were, and in less than a moment, the two were standing inside the Manor itself. "Lady be here soon, pleatings to be seatings yourself."

Rather than take the invitation, Harry simply spun in place, looking at the furnishings, the portraits, the house itself like he'd been there before. Aside from that, the place took his interest for it's posh grandeur. The halls of Hogwarts, and in some cases the offices in the Ministry themselves sometimes seemed far and above the normal concept of ornamentation, but here was another level entirely. Gilding on cornices, masonry that had no purpose other than to accent the fall of shadows in this or that way, lighting to suit the same and below it all, the floor itself was aligned for the most effect. Shadows cast upon it only brought out the crests of two houses more distinctly, defining them and forcing the eye to take notice. Stepping back to inspect them from a new angle, Harry had to wonder at his felt connection to this place. There, beside the Malfoy crest was that of his adopted line, Black.

"Lord Black," her voice echoed down to them, from above and instinctively Harry peered up the staircase that unrolled in it's curve of rails and risers into the main hall. Beckoning to them, there on the rise between floors was Narcissa. "Please, come up to a sitting room." With that said, she simply walked off as if they were already the few dozen meters close enough to follow.

With a shared glance, the two sped after, shrugging off the stifling sense of decorum the place lent. So much finery made it difficult to feel comfortable, Harry reasoned. That must be why the rich seemed so stuffy. Their homes and habits made them uncomfortable in their own skins.

At the top of the stair, Harry put his wondering at the nature of the privileged sneer aside and considered the hallways presented. "Tonks, which way is the sitting room," he asked quietly, but only received a look of exasperation in return. "What? I never asked if your family was close, what harm could it do?"

Shaking her head, Tonks began a point-me charm but had her hand stilled by Harry. "What is it?"

Blinking, as if he'd seen something unclear, Harry looked about again, before furrowing his brow. "I think she's this way."

"How can you tell?"

Looking back at her with a distant sort of stare, he shrugged, "the house told me."

Oh yes there were definitely going to have a talk later. Tonks didn't bother to mask her irritated posture as the two of them entered the sitting room Harry's "Narcissa sense" was leading them to.

"I have made arrangements for Draco to be otherwise occupied. At the moment, he still blames you, not Lucius himself for his death." Setting her tea aside, the blonde woman gestured to the chair opposite her own. "Would you like to sit?"

Feeling like she was passenger to a bad dream, Tonks followed as Harry did just that. Taking his own seat, he waited for Tonks to slip wordlessly down, before speaking, "Sorry Tonks, I just knew you'd have some objection, or even go so far as to think I was under a compulsion to come here. Couldn't risk it, so I had to do it secretly."

She couldn't think of much else to say, so sufficed with what she had. "Just... explain."

Nodding, Harry agreed it was time to do so. "At the Will, Sirius made me heir to more than just the money and titles involved with the House of Black. He also gave me access to their blooded magic, something powerful I've not heard about yet."

Picking up as Harry eyed a scone, Narcissa smiled slightly, her usual scowl missing, "Though usually the Head of House is determined by age and purity of the line, but for some time our House has been riddled with more intrigue than the Wizengamot itself. Elders wanted to insure no unruly children had ideas of usurping their role too soon."

"I'd imagine that was the source of the Bleeding ritual I was a part of, among other reasons."

"Adoption, end of line emergencies, and sometimes alliances," the former Lady Malfoy added.

Tonks was accepting this just fine, some of it was covered in their study of magical history, some just by listening at the right times, at colleagues and friends in and after school. "I still don't understand why you so easily trust her," the young witch asked, the source of her ire obvious. "After all else that's happened, why her?"

Harry's brow knit, but not in annoyance. "I'll try to explain that one. I'm still not perfectly sure how it works, as this is literally new to me, but the gist is this.

"The binding I have with the House of Black interconnects me to all of that bloodline, and any magic that's been tied to it. If I push at that link hard enough, I can speak with or find the minds of not just Narcissa here, but Bellatrix, Draco, you and your mother, despite being stricken from the records." That made the young woman start, and she sat back, eyeing Harry as if he'd just sprouted another head. "Aside from that, it also connects me to places and things. Did you know that Malfoy Manor was once one of the properties many of the family went to, to retire?"

"It has since been renovated magically, but the property itself and most of the building are so permeated that the attempt to overwrite that link was a failure." Snorting, the woman seemed to stare off to the side, not attempting to hide her displeasure. "Imagine that."

Filing that reaction for another time, Tonks looked between the two, how at ease Harry was and sighed. "So, I guess it works like a kind of oath. You're not wary and on edge, because you know she'll not act against you."

Considering that a moment, Harry shook his head. "I trust her to work in her own best interest. Which is why she won't act against me," he amended, and grinned at their host. "But to a degree, the link allows

me something similar to Legilimency between those of the House, and-

"Not precisely true, Lord," Narcissa interrupted, smiling in apology. "Only those with a strong bond to the line can do so. Among the others, it is only a sense of where and who. We know one another. But only one, usually the Head of House, can call on it to enter the mind."

Laughing slightly, Harry shrugged. "Like I said, I'm new to this. Between that bond, Narcissa's own agenda and the tie of blood, I think I may have found a solution to my Black problem." They both ignored the somewhat displeased look on the older woman's face at the way Harry phrased that, but said nothing in regard to it. "First off, I can pass to her the Head of House, and that would let the other issue be easier to focus on."

Tonks assumed he meant his own House, and nodded, following along. "But what would keep her acting in your best interests?"

"The easy answer to that would be, that he can't." Sipping her tea, the woman favored them with a small smirk. "But, it just so happens that unlike many members of my family, Sirius and I had a common ideal. We were both tired to death of the name of our line being made a curse, a stain upon the wizarding world. My sister, Bellatrix," clarifying more for the point than any mistake, Narcissa smiled at the gesture, letting Tonks know that she wasn't speaking of Andromeda, her other sister, "does little to improve it. I do not pretend, nor will I be a champion for the light, but I will be one for my family's honor."

"And if Voldemort's cause becomes more aligned with your own interests?"

Tonks' question was met with a more violent response than she expected, "That power-mad fool has endangered not only my close family, but the name Black itself. My husband was not always such a boot-licking fool," snapping the last words, the woman took a breath and let it go, slowly. "Understand. Lucius and I loved one another once. I saw in him a cunning and agile mind. One capable of great things, and a hope in me sprang up that he could take our family back

into a brighter future. Not the light, as the lines are drawn, but perhaps not the decline into madness it has been.

"In our youth, the Dark Lord came to power. Those of the next generation, those that would know power and influence he snatched up to be his followers. Lucius was among those." With a sigh, the woman continued, "in time it became less of his own plans, as his master's will. That was when I knew my Lucius was lost. All that remained was the shell of a man, who could have shaped this world."

Though Harry knew her reasons, it still bothered him a great deal to admit that a push in the right way, and Narcissa would be backing not Tom, but perhaps another Lord, perhaps not so dark. "Which brings us back to now, and why she'll help me."

"Indeed." Straightening, the woman regarded Tonks intently. "Know that I owe you no explanations. I do this, because my Lord asks. He seems to put great stock in your opinion," Tonks looked to Harry, as he delicately choked on his tea. Narcissa smirked. "We have already discussed what will happen, but it falls on you to be the key for this. He will not move forward, until you are satisfied this is the proper path."

The former Auror felt her color rising strongly, and failed dramatically to suppress it. "My, that is a fetching shade of vermilion, you put a Weasley to shame," her aunt's words, though toneless, still irritated her. Never mind her hair had gone flame-red as her talent misfired.

Marshalling herself, Tonks resumed her 'normal' appearance, and regarded her aunt carefully. "You need my approval to move forward?"

Nodding, Harry refused to look up from his cup. "This doesn't just affect me. It affects us both. Due to the fact we're both more or less on the run from both Voldemort and Dumbledore, we need all the allies we can get, but also have twice as many enemies." Pausing, he looked up into her eyes and smiled. "I'd rather not make one of you as well."

Swallowing hard, Tonks only nodded. "I understand. So tell me what you're planning. I'll see what holes I can punch in it, and then we'll patch it to make it hold water."

Harry nodded and stood, pacing as he worked through the plan. "The first thing, is get this Lordship transferred. I can't keep it, and the longer I'm bound to it, the harder it will be to lose."

"Won't your strong connection to the Black line go with it?"

"One could suppose it would, and I know what you're thinking, Tonks," Narcissa answered, pouring herself more tea. "If his connection gets weaker, how can he tell I'm not betraying him?"

"That had crossed my mind."

Harry simply shrugged and took another scone. "Wizard's oath. Plus, with the Black fortune and it's power in her hands, she doesn't have to worry about Draco becoming one of Voldemort's pet projects. He can go on with his life, she with hers, and with a significant dent in the Death Eater's numbers already, not worry about more trouble than she can buy help with."

"Buy help with?"

Narcissa grinned with Harry. "Come now, you don't think after all that's happened in our world in the last few centuries, that mercenary companies haven't sprung into existence? With the Dark Lord's power, money and personnel bases all taking heavy losses, his options are few. Likely he will regroup and start recruiting again, but this time it will be with threats and promises of exclusion from his culling. It would be the expected path."

Now, Tonks was beginning to see Harry's plan. Narcissa was a politician, and by nature a tactician as well. Such a well ensconced wild card to both sides working for him alone would be a power to be reckoned with. "So, then you can marshal a personal guard to keep yourself and your allies safe, while maintaining a power base to keep both sides working against a new two front war."

"Keeping both from gaining too much power, and making much headway," Harry concluded. "Add to her power base my own, in time, and it would make Tom's forces easier to deal with. That leaves he himself open, and we've already seen how his personal issues can weaken him."

Tonks didn't understand that part, but conceded the rest. There was one thing still bothered her. "What of Draco? What if he decided on his own, after all this to turn to Voldemort's side?"

The pained grimace on Narcissa's face spoke of her own issues with that idea. "I've done what I can. I will show him how this war will likely play out. How the things his father has done have ruined our family. How they doomed himself. After I do all I can, to show him the error of Lucius's ways, if he still chooses to be a fool, then I will... I will," closing her eyes, the woman took a stilling breath. "I will let him join my enemy."

The unstated result of that was left unsaid, by all parties.

"I guess I don't see any problem then, though it's still a bit shocking to see you as an ally, Aunt Cissy."

Laughing quietly, the woman shook her head. "I know. A year ago, this would be inconceivable. But times change. People change. Lucius showed me that sometimes, even those who are the closest to you, can become something utterly unrecognizable." Smirking a bit, she also regarded Harry somewhat amusedly, "And besides. It appeases my own House senses to have the Lordship back where blood calls it."

"Always Pure, still eh?"

"Some habits, Lord, are harder to release than others."

"Now, shall we start with business?" Taking up the forms for assignment of proxies, Narcissa let fall her guise of the the pleasant hostess, and began the task of cementing the foundation for a power base. She could try to explain to Nymphadora that her loyalties would be ironclad, but even she wasn't so sure. If Harry made an enemy of

Narcissa, then all bets were off. She just didn't think the young man that stupid. Her reasons to keep her promise were simple. It would give her the opportunity to turn Draco back to her, and the House of Black, and away from that incompetent pretender Voldemort. She would also be indebted to Harry for returning to her, the rightful title of Lord, so she could carry out the task of making the House of Black as noble as it once was. The years since Grindelwald's reign of terror had taken a toll on their reputation and she would work to her best not to waste this opportunity.

He knew this. Saw it in her mind as easily as she could have told him. Smiling to herself, she could think of worse allies, than the man who continued to stymie and evade the supposed darkest threat of their age, while also pulling one over on the champion for the light. After all, the gray was a much wider, much more comfortable place to be, and held less in the way of expectations.

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Later that night, or rather morning, Tonks amended, they returned to the small loft with a muffled crack of Apparition and the two fell side by side to the couch. "I had no idea she was such a tactician."

"Lucius and she had planned to do quite a lot in the political arena, back before Voldemort." Harry rubbed at his eyes, trying to banish the endless impression of contract's script from his mind. "Were they left alone, likely he'd be Minister."

Snorting, Tonks kicked at her flatmate and dislodged him from the couch, as she spread out. "I don't think that would have been an improvement."

Shaking his head, partly from the landing and partly from her point, Harry had to admit it wasn't a pretty sight. What would a Lucius without Voldemort as master have been like? "Likely not. But still, at least politicians don't go around killing their opponents."

Tonks just stared at him.

"Alright, don't kill as much."

Nodding, the young witch stretched and made a face as her back settled. "Better. Do you think she'll advocate the pureblood ideals, despite being your ally?"

"I don't think so, at least not as much as Lucius would have liked to," Harry replied. "Think of it like this. Shortly, Voldemort will need to recruit again. When that happens, he'll call on the purebloods as that's recently been his major platform. He wants to either forget his own sad heritage, or is using it as a rallying point to make his stand to the wizarding world." Pausing, he seemed to grow thoughtful, "She'd have to fight her battles with his own views as common ground. That won't sit well, with the other member of the Wizengamot. Nor, would it keep her as the third front of this war, which she intends to be. Sure, a few hints of it here and there would draw his allies away, to a safer cause. She may push that agenda." Toying with the idea, his eyes went distant, and Tonks could tell he was contacting Narcissa through the blood Law. "That may be a good idea, actually."

"Alienate his more entrenched followers, who are now growing paranoid of being Veiled?"

"Exactly."

Mulling this over, Tonks couldn't help but shake her head, worry obvious on her face. "I don't know if it's really that good an idea, to have her pushing that agenda. What about the damage it could do to the muggle-born or those like you and me, halfbloods and all?"

Sighing, Harry just shrugged, "You can't have all sides in an argument come to a happy agreement. It's not possible, with opinions and beliefs. Sometimes you just have to work with what you have. Our world is pretty messed up, and by the end of the war, I hope it wisens up a bit. But if it doesn't then as Moody was reminding us, this isn't the only option."

Biting her lip, Tonks groaned as she sat up and then stood to wander toward her room. "My brain hurts. I'm going to bed."

"Yeah, good idea." Chuckling to himself, Harry went to his own room, but didn't intend to sleep yet. Just because he and Tonks had left Malfoy Manor, didn't mean he was done with their discussion. "Narcissa?"

"I am here, Lord."

"I'm never going to get used to that..."

"If all goes well, you won't need to," she sent back with the impression of a smirk.

Chuckling to himself, he admitted this was true. "Are you sure that you'll not make the Ministry into just a shadow of what Voldemort is planning as well?"

The soon to be Lady Black paused, and he could feel her mind turning over the possibilities and potential for such a thing. "I doubt my path will lead there, despite what you may think. I see what that bigotry has done for us, as a people. Though it pains me to say it, I would be blind not to see the potential, and how it has helped us, in those not of pure blood. I am no fool. Magical power doesn't follow blood, anymore than the right to rule, as you have so easily demonstrated."

"So you admit that those not of pure blood are equal?"

Her feeling of hesitation grew, but seemed resigned. "I can see the trends. Our elders were complacent. They did little to improve on our society, and in that trend, we were ill-prepared for Grindelwald, who worked so closely with muggles and utterly made a fool of our best laid plans. Again, Voldemort comes and into that stagnation, draws power from the same thing that damns us to be easier to prey on. I think he mocks the pure even as he uses them as pawns."

"I think you correct, in that Narcissa."

The feeling of distaste from their talk lessened, from her end. "Indeed. Though it is almost compulsion for me to think so personally as a Black, as a society, I see the merits."

"Thank you for allaying my fear on this, Narcissa."

"Any time, Lord Black."

He dropped the connection at the sensation of her laughter at his discomfort, shaking his head. Tonks obviously took her sense of humor from her mother, who got it in equal doses with her sisters. Harry wondered if he could survive a life where two of them worked in concert. Shivering at the thought, he fell asleep.

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"Good morning, Lord Black," the voice was oily and meant to annoy him. It did an admirable job.

"Damnit Tonks, that's just not nice." Grumbling, Harry pulled himself out of bed to the sound of his flatmate and her giggling. Today, he would spend more time with Narcissa and learning of the more subtle gifts his tie to the Black bloodline gave. She felt that his connection to that magic had little to do with Sirius' ritual but more with his own power and thought it would be a good idea to make him more aware of its benefits. That he was learning a branch of magic that could potentially be the vaulted "Power He Knows Not" didn't hurt of course. It also piqued his interest, in that his own House was also alleged to have such a blood bond to magic itself. Narcissa seemed to believe a strong control over those abilities would only help him in the future.

He also felt that it would help in his wresting of those bonds from Dumbledore, in time. This, he felt the need to keep to himself. Over the next week, he learned that the connection and its power were long considered simply to fall under the idea she referred to as Law. The reason for this, she explained, was that it originally was.

"Our laws and traditions used to be so intrinsically tied to magic, that falsehoods, crime and war were impossible. But then, magic was so innate those things that were tied to it, that there were no wizards. Humans weren't innately magical."

He argued then that the idea of pure bloods was moot before it began, but she waved off his points, "In a way, yes of course. But then, once humans became magical, it became a hoarded ideal. People were ignorant of how magic moved, between bloodlines, and strove to keep it to themselves. Those powerful first families may have been trying to solidify their position in the world, or were just greedy, but that jealousy set others on the path of war to claim a piece of that magic.

"Wars, the congealing of Houses, all these things gave rise to our rather secluded, insular society." Shrugging, Narcissa continued, "Later, it became more imperative, as a way to keep people in power who wanted to be. Spontaneous wizards couldn't possibly be as powerful as a fifth generation pure blood, could they?" Smirking, she simply shook her head sadly. "Truth or not, power remained with those Houses. Often, the generations of those well-used to magic allowed them much time to accrue their fortunes, increase their base of influence. That is the power of blood, Harry. Our claim may sometimes be thought of as just dwelling in blood, but it is in our heritage as leaders. That is where my family went astray."

"They stopped being leaders, and became followers," Harry realized with a start. "That's what you're fighting against."

Shrugging, Narcissa conceded the point. "Purity has many definitions. I imagine many of my ancestors took it to mean different things. Since meeting you, and having my own husband become a toady, I have also changed my view."

Talks like this accompanied and were supplemented by small exercises in his power. Legilimency and Occlumency were sister branches of a way in which the magic could be used. Calling on the Law to shield one's mind, he could force Narcissa's probing magics into a distant field, or down the halls of an ancient home, while he stayed safely away. Though the use of it as Legilimency was more

limited, that being with those of the Black bloodline, he could see the similarities enough to understand the magics of both. Soon, he was practicing with some regularity both aspects, blooded and not, with Tonks and Narcissa.

Another surprising similarity was in Apparition. This was more difficult, as it seemed his magical tie to places within that Law was conduit enough to simply use it to travel. Baffled, Harry tried it once and ended up slamming into Narcissa from across the room, as if hit by a powerful Accio spell. The trio had been very silent, as he disentangled his hands from her robes. "Perhaps you should practice this with Tonks."

He thought that was a better idea as well. Tonks raised a brow and made a point to keep her feet, shod in steel toed boots, up on the table at waist height as he considered that. Harry then began to practice behind the Manor, with the trees that made up the copse around the property. Harry had less splinters from his incident with the Whomping Willow.

The week spent learning wasn't enough to master either the bloodline allowed nor the other versions of these two arts, but he had a reasonable idea, which would allow him to practice. More work was spent with Rufus, planning and becoming familiar with Narcissa – at least the new Narcissa. Though they couldn't explain fully what was going on, the man took it in stride once he saw their choices for proxies. Harry left them early one night, laughing to each other about the merits of using the pureblood argument against its own supporters to betray more of Voldemort's followers.

All in all, he'd become confident enough that a week and half later, he ceded the title and Lordship to Narcissa. Still feeling somewhat hesitant, he'd had Tonks fashion for him a portkey, but didn't need it. Shortly after the two had lunch and in a rare show of emotion, the new Lady Black embraced him and thanked him for giving her family the chance it deserved.

Perhaps this is what Dumbledore meant with his insistence for second chances and forgiveness. Maybe the man had no idea at all.

His use and mastery of the Law of Black didn't lessen, much to Narcissa's shock. If anything, as he practiced and worked, and she inspected his abilities, she had to admit he was getting stronger. Though there was no practical application of it, the signs pointed to him having little problem when his own birthright became a battleground.

Not realizing it, that became the issue much sooner than he had planned.

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It had been a fairly idyllic week and a half, when during one of their idle days at the flat, Moody burst in with a harried look to his face. "Trouble," was all he said, as the man leaned against the door to catch his breath.

Snape's duplicity was made known to Harry oddly through two different channels. One, Narcissa, as she knew the man from being her son's mentor, and from Lucius' time as a Death Eater. This on it's own rankled and perturbed the woman, as yet again another influence from Voldemort had it's claws in her son. Never mind that his true master may be Dumbledore. Actions, those obvious and easy to see, were louder than words he couldn't utter. Moody also knew, being inside Dumbledore's inner circle and also his appointed hit wizard, when things became too dirty, or too questionable. That Harry had a spy in one camp, that was privy to another in Voldemort's wasn't lost to him. "What's going on, Mad-Eye?"

Still getting his wind, the man pulled his flask and took a steadying pull. "He's gotten word of your recent alliance with Lady Malfoy, er, former Malfoy, and thinks you've gone off the deep end. He's mobilizing the Order, since you've headed him off politically for the time being."

Tonks stood and looked about herself nervously, "What do you mean mobilized?"

"Orders to stun and capture on sight. He's convinced someone's gotten to you by dark arts. He's got his politicians in the Ministry, but Rufus is adamant. You must have some pretty strong allies and connections now for Dumbledore to get shut down so easy."

Nodding distractedly, Harry sent a mental call to Narcissa. She replied, but seemed to have her own sources, all agreeing with Moody's report. "What do you think, Moody? Is it time?"

Regarding the two of them a moment, the man had to agree. "Yeah, I think it is."

Swearing, Harry ran a hand through his hair. He'd not yet had a chance to secure his family's Law yet, and if things were going as hard south as Moody implied, that chance wouldn't come for some time. Though he could, by rights, have the Ministry put a desist order on the Order itself. They were more useful to him tying up and preoccupying Voldemort though. Going with the lesser of two evils, Harry let the Order be, while his own few contacts tried to keep him abreast. He told them with little room for argument that they shouldn't, remembering what happened to Tonks. The Twins and Remus grudgingly complied for the most part, but the Werewolf was still hard to convince to keep his distance. Despite it, he was grateful to Lupin, as he really didn't want to get cut off entirely from his friends.

Friends. That idea on its own set his head aching. "Moody, how bad is it going to be?"

"Likely?" Pausing to consider the Headmaster's own seeming crusade to reacquire Harry rivaled his goal to defeat Voldemort, Moody had to assume the worst. "He'd Obliviate the summer out of your mind. Turn your friends either for or against you depending on how well you could be directed. May resort to worse things."

Tonks snorted, eyes widening at the possibilities Moody had thrown out, "worse things? Like what?"

Moody regarded her icily. "Using Amortentia to solidify his compliance? The man is a chess player. His goals are in the right place, but time and the stress of being who he is, has broken him in

many ways. I'm not saying he's senile – far from it. But when you've been around as long as him, I can't imagine morality being as solid when you've had to do the things he has." Alastor knew he couldn't tell them the full truth, even if he knew it all. Oaths and his own sense of loyalty kept that at bay. Still, he had a lot of faith in Potter to succeed in his task, and knew that whether his own ghosts were still or not, Dumbledore's methods weren't right. The old bastard Obliviating him didn't help his sense of obligation either. Snorting, he added just for spite, "For the Greater Good."

The three sat quietly having a brief lunch and planning that night. Harry had wanted to try a strike at his family home, to assert his Law before they took other action, but was overruled by Moody and Tonks. "He'll have eyes there, wards and safeguards. Whatever's there, he needs it, either for some personal goal or as leverage on you. You can bet he'll know if you tried it."

"I don't know, if we move forward with the plan, we won't be able to get that from him for some time," Harry argued, and he had to admit, the draw of it was strong. Since ceding the Black Law back to Narcissa, the lack of having himself so intimately tied to something like it, was a vast emptiness in him. He reassured himself that soon he'd have his own to fill it, but the idea of being unable to for an indefinite time was almost panicking. "I don't like him using my own family against me."

Tonks sighed and nodded, "I admit, this may be more serious than we're thinking. I've just started learning what this magic does, and it makes sense that Dumbledore's been using it to track and control Harry more easily. Obviously he's not gotten full control of it, as otherwise he'd have a very strong way to keep Harry under his thumb." Looking from one man to the other, she shrugged and rolled her shoulders, trying to work out some of the tension that settled there, "Maybe Harry has a point."

Moody grimaced, but nodded as well. "Removing that from him will be the best way to ensure the plan works. If he gets frantic, the old bastard may do something drastic. Who knows what he could do with a blood tie to Harry that strong."

"It makes me wonder why he's not already, actually." Those thoughts only added fire to Harry's determination, and within the hour, they'd started planning their attack on Aberdeenshire. The maps they had were simple enough to read and plan, but the estate itself was still unplottable. This meant they couldn't Portkey or Apparate there, despite Harry's birthright. Irritating as that was, it was simpler to plan this than anything overt against Dumbledore. As they were discussing things, Harry felt his connection to Narcissa flare briefly.

Harry motioned for them to be at ease, as he stood and prepared for the woman's arrival. A feeling of air compressing faintly heralded the pop of her moving via the other means, but seeing as the flat wasn't within the web of Law, she had to focus on Harry.

The result was much like his first attempt at it. Narcissa snapped into being and was caught somewhat gracelessly by Harry, before her momentum could topple the two to the floor. "Thank you, Harry." The young man smiled again, partly from having the still attractive woman clinging to him, partly from irking Tonks for that same fact, and partly because since he'd relinquished the Lordship Black, she's stopped referring to him by an honorific.

Settling between himself and Tonks, Narcissa sighed and gratefully accepted a cup of tea. "Thank you. Sorry for so sudden an arrival, but I have dire news." She knew as well, of Moody's loyalties but did not know of their reasoning. For the purposes of possible deniability and their own protection, Harry was keeping some things close to home. "Albus will be petitioning the Wizengamot to let his Stewardship of the Potter estate become permanent. His reason being that with Harry assuming the Black Lordship, he cannot also assume the Potter one. I believe he is attempting to force your hand, or use this to bend you, Harry. Obviously he doesn't know about your passing of the title. We could use that to our advantage."

Irritated, Harry had to agree. Obviously, the Wizengamot wouldn't... no. They would. If it meant keeping his power base in check, the body there would act against him. That they'd dare think about this... "That's the final straw then. I need him occupied, somehow. A countermeasure to keep him tied up while I move to take the Law by force."

"If this is a feign, then why not counter it with one. He means to flush Harry out, we can use one to keep Dumbledore in," Tonks reasoned. "He's also mobilizing the Order, with catch-on-sight being the rule. Now, all we have to do, is get one of the more... suggestible Order members in a bad spot, and have him show his hand."

Narcissa regarded her niece with a smile. "Why, Nymphadora, that's devious. I'm proud."

Wrinkling her nose, the young witch still smiled. "I do what I can."

And thus, the last three days before Harry found himself packing, while Tonks burned eggs progressed.

Narcissa preemptively took out halt-of-action notices, the wizarding equivalent of restraining orders, on the Order. These weren't filed, but the knowledge of them wasn't hidden.

Moody informed Harry of a time when an Order patrol in Diagon would be coordinating with an Auror patrol as well.

Tonks spent the better part of a day learning the opposite of the Apparition art in the Law magic, tapping into that blood binding to basically emulate an anti-Apparition ward. It wasn't easy, but she could channel the effect well enough for a short time, but it left her exhausted, and would only work on those also within the Black bloodline. That's all that was needed.

Harry, for his part, made plans to meet Hermione in Diagon.

Two days later, outside of Flourish and Blott's, Harry met with a smiling, bushy-haired young woman who fairly ran at him and caught him in a hug. "Oh Harry, where have you been? Are you alright?"

Chuckling, the young man pried himself loose and the two shared a laugh. "Yes, Mrs. Weasley – or should that be future Mrs-" he never finished as she started pummeling his arm affectionately. The two moved down the street, while Harry made smalltalk and caught her up as best as his plans would allow.

Hermione, ever curious, was full of questions. "Is it true what they've said? That you've run off with Tonks and are in league with the Malfoys?" His confused but smiling silence only egged her on. "C'mon Harry, what's been going on?"

"What I can say is, 'run off' is very relative, and as for Mrs. Malfoy, we've come to a political agreement. Other than that, I've been studying, catching up on my sleeping and eating, and trying to figure out where the future's taking me."

Glowering a bit, Hermione went silent to think about what Harry had said. It sounded like a puzzle, not the usual straightforward way he usual spoke. If anything she was used to his manner being morose or somewhat defeated after a summer with his family, and the change was welcome, but she wondered on it quite a lot. Shortly the conversation turned back to her, and then of course, Ron. "We're alright. I mean things are going OK. We still argue a lot, and his manners are atrocious but-

"Are you happy?"

Her mouth worked slowly, silently as she considered that. Though her home life had been very bland, but good, she could only suppose what a normal couple should be. Her mother and father did argue a lot, both of them being very willful and stubborn, but they seemed happy. Then there were the Weasleys, and how Arthur and Molly argued sometimes, but seemed to genuinely love one another. "I think I am. This may not be "the one" I mean we're still young, but for now I'm happy."

Ruminating on her answer, Harry relaxed a bit. He worried that his antics would have left his friends frantic, or being used as tools, but it seemed things were going alright. Luckily they'd focused on one another instead of his problems. A year ago that would have made him upset, maybe... now he was grateful they had one another, while he was focusing on his future as well.

Speaking of... a flash of blue Auror's robes let him know it was almost time. "Hermione, this is important. Listen carefully.

"There is an Order patrol coming by. You know what they're supposed to do. Don't fight. Don't get in the way." At the young woman's incredulous look, Harry just smiled and squeezed her hand, where she'd held on to his arm. "Trust me. It's OK."

Though she looked of all the world like that was exactly what it wasn't, she nodded faintly and tried to paint a less concerned expression on her face. "If you say so. But I expect an explanation Mr. Potter."

"I knew you would," he replied, with a smile. "Now, here we go. It's showtime."

Hermione blinked, her mouth open to ask what he meant when Diagon erupted into light and sound from spellfire.

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A/N: My kingdom for an order of nachos.

Chapter Twelve

The Ten Commandments are for lame brains. The first five are solely for the benefit of the priests and the powers that be; the second five are half truths, neither complete nor adequate.

—Ira Johnson, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*

To Hermione, the cheerful reunion turned into a nightmare so suddenly she nearly forgot herself. After Harry's warning, she looked about frantically and spotted Doge stalking toward them with a sense of dread. Then the man shot a stunner at Harry, in broad daylight.

What ensued would have been comical had she been paying more attention, but she and Harry had been catching up, forgetting the past and the hard things, and just being themselves again. And then Harry was sidestepping and dodging a number of minor binding and stunning spells, and seemed to be heckling the Order agent as he approached. Hermione was about to berate him for being a prat when he shushed her and pushed her aside, causing her to stumble and sit in one of the nearby cafe chairs, staring incredulously at her friend.

By the time she'd gotten back to her feet, Harry was casting charms and jinxes... what? Blinking, Hermione knew Harry was better versed than this. He wasn't even trying to disarm or stun the man... She narrowed her eyes and moved to get by his side but he told her to stay back and wait. Her snarled response and exasperated sigh were met but a snarky comment by him, and then she stopped thinking when the red flash of a spell took him right in the face.

She had just been talking with him about their summers, a little voice in Hermione's mind spoke up suddenly. Why did people always try to ruin the small happinesses he had? The shock of what was going on bubbled into incoherent anger and then rage as Doge knelt down to obviously put a Portkey on her stunned friend. One of her best friends. Turning in anger to the man she knew as an acquaintance from her time in Grimmauld, the young witch did what anyone her age would do, seeing an adult assault a friend in broad daylight with spells.

She ran at him, screaming angrily and tried to claw his eyes out...

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Politics, Harry admitted one night as he sat talking idly with Tonks, was never going to be one of his strong points. Through all the talk with Rufus and Narcissa, the one solid thing he took out of it all, was a healthy dislike of the entire thing. Sure, he'd been placed in the middle of it, had done his part and felt the elation of actually seeing one of his goals come to pass. To be a part of it, to always have to deal with the machinations of man and their duplicity... no. It wasn't in him.

It did irk the hell out of him that politics seemed to insist he take an active hand. Perhaps it came back down to what Narcissa had said. Power pooling, how it calls to itself and tries to gather. Or it may just be, that like pocket lint, you couldn't avoid it no matter what.

Another stunner snapped overhead and he ducked further, making sure Hermione wasn't in danger. The things one thought about during a spellfight.

As planned, the Aurors were coming up the way on their routine patrol as the Order member Moody had alerted them to, Doge if he remembered well, was doing the same. That the two were in opposite directions from one another should have made this too risky, but Harry planned to be on the corner with the Order agent, before the patrol reached the battlefield. Neither the Aurors nor Doge could see one another due to the bend in the alley, but he could see them both. Figuring the time was right, he made sure to move out in plain view, catching Doge's eye. That triggered the first stunner, which he ducked and let fly over his head – and directly into the view of the passing Aurors.

Pushing Hermione to the side and behind the corner, Harry pulled up a weak shield charm and made a flourish of pointing his wand at Doge, "Stay back! I'm not going anywhere!"

Realizing his cover was blown, and that the target was already on the defensive, Doge continued to advance, laying into the boy with

stunning and incapacitation hexes. Annoyingly Harry used the corner to shield himself as well as simply dodge most of the spells, irritating the man. Doge had age and experience on his side, and figured the youth would be an easy target, but this wasn't correct at all. He needed to get closer, or his spells would never connect.

Harry played it close, knowing his shield would only stop one or two hexes, and maybe a stunner if he was lucky – but not all at once. If he let one get too close, he'd be wide open, and he needed the Aurors closer if this was going to work. Luckily that one stray stunner had done the trick. Doge's annoyance was helping immensely, as the light show around the corner from the two blue-robed men only speeded their advance. "Hermione, stay down. Just wait it out, I'm perfectly safe, alright?"

"You better be ready to explain this, Harry," the young witch snapped, her eyes wide and stunned at the source of Harry's attack. "Why does it always end up like this?"

"Life's no fun without a little excitement?" the quip was only half-hearted, as a particularly strong stunner snapped against his shield and tore it down. Apparently Doge was tired of playing. Harry decided it was time to slow the man down. "You made me do this!" he yelled for effect, hoping his acting wasn't too bad... and proceeded to start lobbing impediment, jelly-legs and stinging hexes at the approaching man. Sure, he could stun him, if he wanted to. The old man kept walking in a straight line right at him, as if begging for it... but that would ruin the plan.

Sighing to himself about outdated and stupid mindsets, Harry noticed the blue robes only a few dozen yards away. Time for phase two. Dropping his shield he winked at Hermione and took a stunner to the face.

Inside the bookstore, Tonks bit back a snarl when his head snapped back from the spell. Immediately she latched onto Harry's magical aura and held on, right after casting a wandless enervation counter before he fell. She stifled a smirk at Hermione's scream, as the young woman lost herself and latched onto the man Doge, Tonks remembered the name, and started pummeling his back and head

weakly. Just as the Order agent kneeled down quickly and placed what looked to be a shiny coin on Harry, Tonks felt that anchor she's placed on the young wizard wrench, and her vision went hazy with the drain of resisting the pull.

They'd tried the spell a number of times with Narcissa, and the result was usually the same. That small factor of failure made it dangerous she knew, but they continued with the original plan. The easy solution was found by Moody, who being a bit craftier than the others when it came to spells and stealth, suggested Harry simply fake being stunned, and reinforce the anchoring with Tonks. They tried that a few times, but decided Harry's acting wasn't on par in the heat of the moment, and with a little tweaking, he'd decided to take a stunner and have Tonks enervate him before the Order could Portkey or Apparate him.

This worked fine, but the only unknown was Hermione. She couldn't know, or the whole thing would be for nothing. Harry assured them she'd not tell, or reveal their plot, so much as... well she was a worse actor than him. So, promising himself to ask forgiveness later, Harry set the plan in motion.

As expected, seeing him fall to a stunner only rushed the Aurors to his side. The benefit of the anchoring spell he was channeling with Tonks, was that the addition of another caster made it easy to maintain... and expand. When Doge noticed the blue of Aurors approaching, he snatched up the Portkey to escape, only to find a grinning Boy-Who-Lived latched onto his forearm. "Going somewhere?"

It was not a good day to be Elphias Doge.

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"I hate stunners," Harry griped, sipping a potion to clear the headache with a grimace.

"Your idea," Tonks reminded him, checking over the paperwork that they needed to file a second time, as they sat in a petitioner's room within the Ministry. "You'd think they'd send the Order in pairs, like Aurors. Well, that'd not work well, there's so few of them really."

Nodding, Harry looked over to the sulking Hermione and sighed. "I'm sorry," he offered again, only to have the young witch huff and nose into her book further. She wasn't even reading it, he noted with a frown. "Hermione, I really wasn't using you here, OK? I wanted to spend some time with you before things got too intense, and this was the only way."

"Oh and it just happened to coincide with your little act, right?" Waspish, she shook her head angrily. "Could you not Owl? Or even muggle-post. Half of us were worried sick, or sick of worrying, with all the Order cranked up into a tizzy by this summer and your antics."

Harry hadn't thought of that, and he winced at how bad this looked. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I really am. What can I do to make this right?" Glancing over his shoulder, Harry wondered if that snort came from Tonks or was just the sound of her scooting her chair. Returning his gaze to Hermione, he blinked rapidly at her sudden change in demeanor.

"I think we can come to an agreement," she stated in a matter-of-fact way. Harry didn't bother to turn around to verify if that was Tonks laughing.

Swallowing, Harry wondered if he could reach his wand fast enough. "What did you have in mind," he asked, making sure the door wasn't blocked, just in case.

"A story," she said simply, and his eyes rested on what was under the book she'd been reading. Her wand was pointed right at him, while she grinned triumphantly. "A story about a young man with no consideration to mail his friends so they won't worry themselves silly, and how he's been spending what seems like a very eventful summer. Without mailing."

Resigning himself to his chair, headache and story, Harry wondered if this plan was as foolproof as he'd thought.

A few hours, a few more butterbeers and a bit less angry tension later, and the three walked out of the small room in a rather amicable way. "So, are you really going through with this?"

Nodding, Harry smiled sadly at one of his best, longest-held friends. "I talked it over with Moody and Rufus. Scrimgeour wasn't thrilled, with all the lack of a moral pillar to work with, but this is best in the long run we think."

Biting her lip, Hermione wasn't so sure, but realized at least this time, Harry was seeking council before rushing off headlong into things. That it wasn't her council only stung a bit. "Are you sure Dumbledore won't help you?"

"I don't think the cost of working with him is worth it to me, in the end," Harry countered, shaking his head. "I explained what I could about what he's done, and though it's pissed me off to no end, I know I can't move against him directly, or indirectly without galvanizing people against me. He's still Dumbledore. People just haven't been on the receiving end of his more... shady side, I suppose."

"Well, if you remember the Prophet articles, people reacted well enough against him."

Considering her words, Harry had to agree. Hermione had a point there, but she was missing one detail, "But see, that was a concerted effort, and all the things that Voldemort had done were being pinned, where they could, on him. Now, with Tom at large and it obvious what's going on, they can't do that. They need him."

"Harry," Turning at her softer tone, Harry stopped, as she did as well. "I don't think they need him as much as they need you. You're the Boy-Who-Lived. People expect you to defeat him again."

Sighing quietly, his shoulders fell. "But Hermione, I don't know how. Sure, I've learned a few new things. I have money. Influence... maybe if I were like Dumbledore I could use that all and do something

amazing. But I'm not." Moving ahead, he settled by one of the balconies overlooking the atrium. Below him, the fountain, the people of the Ministry went about their business. Somewhere down there, Elphias Doge was being questioned. Soon, Dumbledore would have to come and bail out his flunky, something Rufus had promised would take quite a while to do. He had his own bone to pick with the man in charge of the vigilante organization. "I'm only as good as the people around me, and they keep getting hurt. I don't want anyone else to get hurt over my war. On top of that, what power I seem to have... I'm not good with. Which means, eventually, I'm going to lose people important to me. I can't do that.

"I need more. Time, mostly," he admitted, looking back to his friends. "A little wandless magic won't change how this goes. You've not seen Tom fight, it won't matter. Maybe it closes some of the gap, but we're talking decades here."

Looking from one young woman to another, he closed his eyes. "And the political thing is only as good as the Ministry itself. In time even that can fail, if Voldemort took it by force. Narcissa warned me there's no way for politicians to stop terrorists. They thrive on the way people react to them. The only way to root out that threat, is to remove it, and politics can't do that, on it's own.

"Money's fine, sure. I can buy lots of things I never knew I wanted. Hire hit wizards, raise an army. But... what do I know about those things? How can I justify sending people off to fight my fight for me? Would the Ministry tolerate me after it all? I'd just be labeled a new threat, and have to defend myself against people who were my allies. And besides, it's too easy to slip spies into a paid force."

Leaning on the balcony, Harry let his friends close the distance themselves. Thoughts of plans he'd considered and discarded never sat well with him. It always made him feel like a failure, that some simple, clean and easy way to end this wouldn't come to him. "Sure, money helps. Will help. But this..."

A hand on his back eased him some, from his darker musings. "It's alright... I guess I understand then. I don't have to like it, but I see

why, at least," Hermione's voice was soft, but he knew she was being honest with him. Not just saying something kind to ease him.

"I'm glad," he said, and he was. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, he really did need his friend's support now. From tomorrow on, it may be a long time till he could see them again. "Take care of Ron alright?"

"I'm not sure you want details on that, Mr. Potter," turning with an incredulous stare, he started chuckling as Hermione's air of intrigue and mystery cracked. "I guess you're right, I'm a lousy actor."

"Actually I was just picturing you and Ron-

"Hey!"

"-studying."

Hermione blanched and looked at him worriedly. "How did you know what we called it?"

Harry refused to rise to the bait, and simply beckoned his friends along with him. "So, the Aurors have Doge in custody now. Dumbledore will be by to try and get him released, and while that's going on, we'll slip behind him and go retrieve my estate... however that works."

Nodding with the rough plan, Tonks had to point out one glaring problem. "We've seen it on a map, but it is still unplottable. We have no way to get there quickly, and if we try to Apparate the main distance, then broom the rest, we may be cutting time too close, or he may get alerted and try to cut us off."

Grimacing, Harry admitted those were valid points. If they didn't move fast, then likely this would just end up with he and the old man staring at one another angrily over another meeting in Grimmauld about his future and responsibilities. Pursing his lips in thought, Harry wondered about how he would need to take the Stewardship from Dumbledore. For all her knowledge of the bloodlaw, Narcissa's specialty in it had no clue to this. As far as she knew, once someone

came to 'rule' that particular bloodline, it was theirs. There was no way other than death to remove it. That he had a claim to it at all was bothersome, as it turned out that their bloodlines, his and Dumbledore's, shared no common ancestry. His friend and co-conspirator at Gringott's Vorgann had surmised that to hold it this way, Dumbledore had to have an artifact of his family, something that had that bloodlaw in it, and was using that as a channel. That idea didn't reassure him at all.

Maybe he would have some insight into this. "Tonks, lets swing by Gringott's on the way. Maybe I'm missing something obvious."

Making their way out of the Ministry, the two said their goodbyes, for the moment, to Hermione and promised to meet her soon. Harry still had some things to say, to a number of people and though the time he got with Hermione let him outline his plans for the future, it wasn't how he expected to move to the next stage.

Tonks took hold of him and they side-along Apparated to the Bank gates, not pausing to deal with the crowds. Harry and his companion were big news, according to the Prophet, and it seemed everyone had a question. Ducking inside, the pair moved quickly to a booth and were immediately seated in one of the small rooms. Within a minute, Vorgann was there, blinking curiously at the two. "Why, Lord Black, we didn't expect to see so soon after your attack. We trust you are well?"

"Never better, and it's just Harry again," the young wizard replied with a grin. "But I do need some help, with a... family problem."

Vorgann raised a brow and grinned, his wicked teeth glinting. "I see. We do have a small parcel you did not seem to get the message to pick up last time you were here, perhaps that will help?"

Wincing, Harry did remember the small note, and also remember that he forgot it entirely, after the fiasco with Tonks' arrest that day. "Right, that completely slipped my mind. Thank you for reminding me."

"My pleasure, Lord BI – Harry. It's in our nature, to remember the things others forget." Producing the small envelope, the Goblin sat

across from them as Harry undid the seal and pulled out the two items inside.

In his hand, rested what looked to be a slightly tarnished, silver key. Simple, it had none of the traits one would expect in a vault key, in fact it looked more similar to a key for one of their trunks. A loop of leather passed through the key's head, the strand long enough to put around one's neck. Keeping the key in hand, Harry opened the letter than accompanied it.

Son,

As parents, you try hard to plan for everything. School, love, loss and what your children and their children could want or need. Sometimes this comes with choices you really don't want to make. In your case, it was even harder, as the prophecy that surrounds you makes your life hardly your own.

We... are sorry. It's not been easy. I hope if you're reading this, we've been with you a long time, and helped as much as we can. The world is a fickle place, and luck in it not something you can bank on. Because of this, we had to take steps to protect ourselves, as well as you.

First off, we placed all the properties under Fidelius charms, with one of our personal elves as it's keeper. The exception to this being the cottage, since we'll be actually staying there. They are in turn instructed to inform one officer in Gringott's of the property's locations. This should make the bank's side of things at least one part easier.

To manage the estate and it's holdings, and ultimately maintain and see that it passes to you in proper time, we have entrusted Albus Dumbledore to oversee it. He is a hero, and a champion of the good in wizarding people, and has helped us in so many ways. We trust that he will act in your best interest. If something were to happen to him, the task would fall to Sirius, then Remus, then Peter. We would hope nothing could go beyond that, but if it does, then Gringott's itself will oversee things.

If you are receiving this, then obviously... we aren't with you anymore. Likely you've heard all this in the wills. In the even something does go wrong, we had one additional failsafe made. This key, simple as it is, is a complicated little piece of work. Half memory charm, half portkey, half vanishing cabinet. It carries a simple charm to let you Portkey to any of the Potter properties. If you focus on one of them, you can see the grounds from a bird's eye view. Placing it in a door and turning it while picturing one of the homes will let you activate a charm to let you pass from where you are to any door within the grounds. Obviously you would need some knowledge of the homes to use the last function, but then, the other two will help with that.

Normally, only the groundskeeper and headman of the properties would have this, but with war on the horizon... we trust that when you're of age, it will do more good. When we left them, we let all the staff except for the most stalwart elves go, and so this key is now yours.

We hope this finds you in simpler times, more peaceful ones. But if not, then we offer one token of advice. Keep your friends close Harry. Don't let them wander too far, as when you lose sight of them, people have a tendency to change.

All our love,

Lily (Mom) and James (Dad)

Breath coming in heavy draws, Harry closed his eyes and let his anger settle around him like a warm cloak. They trusted Dumbledore, trusted Peter. Though Harry doubted the old man would have plotted against them directly, something in his anger at the man screamed that it was possible, in fact likely. As much as he wanted to believe that, it was too easy to fall into such a trap. Dumbledore may have been the cause of some of Harry's problems, but wasn't the source of them all.

The reminder that Wormtail was still at large irked him sorely, considering the man was responsible for so much of his pain and suffering. Closing his hand on the key, Harry stilled his mind. "I think

this is exactly what we were looking for. How come Dumbledore didn't end up with this?"

"There were specific instructions for it to only be give to you, after you assumed your Majority. It was kept separate from the wills and estate, though the Goblin who is aware of the properties is still bound by the Stewardship. One could assume it was a safeguard, either for the other issues, or it's own."

Considering the idea of the damage anyone could do with the key, had he lost it at an early age or misplaced it, while living at those properties made him appreciate the timing. Still, this would have solved so much... "To think all these places have been waiting for me for sixteen years now." Shaking his head, Harry stood with a sigh. "It's fortunate to find it, but..."

Tonks laid her hand on Harry's, where it rested on the table. "Don't dwell on it. Lets just take it for the boon it is."

"Right," shaking off his melancholy, Harry grinned wryly at Vorgann. "Thanks, this actually ended up being just what we needed."

"Sometimes, things do have a way of working out in simpler, more pleasant ways. I'm glad this visit to our Bank wasn't as eventful as your last."

Tonks snorted and laughed, "You and me both."

When the Goblin left them, Harry handed Tonks the letter and considered the key a moment. "It seems like the sort of things Hagrid or Filch would have at Hogwarts almost. Except for that doorway thing. That'd be a bit odd."

"Indeed. You think your dad may have used that bird's eye view thing as inspiration for your Map?"

Nodding, Harry had to admit there was some sense to that. "It would also explain why Dumbledore has never brought up the properties before. He wasn't part of the Fidelius, so doing so would be basically like dangling an imaginary carrot. I'm sure he probably knows vague

locations, and may have wards there, but specifics probably elude him. Must piss him off a bit."

"I'd imagine so." Gathering up her robes and checking her wands, Tonks gestured to the key and grinned. "So, shall we be off?"

Grinning himself, Harry nodded and focused his thoughts on the town of Aberdeenshire, the Loch nearby, and was instantly rewarded with a hazy, indistinct view of a small plot of land with an indistinct shadow about it. "Interesting. The Fidelius is conflicting with the scrying aspect. I'm wary to try the Portkey, but if you're up for the risk...."

"Silly question. Lets go."

"Right," taking hold of Tonks' hand, Harry willed them both to the image he saw, and felt the familiar whirling pull and disorientation of Portkey travel.

If he'd expected his homecoming to be an easier, or more graceful affair, he was sorely mistaken. Plowing into the turf as if he'd just fallen off his broom, Harry grunted and flipped end over end once before coming to rest. Shaking off the impact, he sighed at the raucous laughter his landing seemed to inspire in his companion. "I'm glad you had a nice trip."

"Nothing compared to your fall," she quipped, earning her a tossed stone in response.

Chuckling, the young man brushed off his robes and looked about himself. If he'd had anything in his mind at what the home he was born in would look like, this was not it. Faintly, having heard of the vaults and the Potter claim to the Wizengamot, he'd thought the Estate to be some mansion, or a huge castle... maybe a kind of wizarding home he'd never seen before. Considering the Burrow and the Lovegood homes, this was entirely possible.

He didn't expect a low, one story home of modest and archaic design. "Um. Harry? Is this the right place?" Tonks' question was pretty much a mirror of his own thoughts. This... could this be it?

"Let me try something," he replied, and tried to move past the low stone wall they saw circling the property. As he neared it, a sense of... irritation and anxiety swept over him. It was like the feeling he got when Snape was hovering over him in Potions, waiting for something to go wrong. As he reached the gap signifying a gate, the feeling hit a peak and without thinking he took four brisk steps back to a bewildered Tonks. "OK, yeah."

"Warded?"

"Oh yeah," he replied, shaking the lingering buzz and sour feeling in his stomach away. Looking back without the haze of spells making his mind insensible, Harry noticed the distance between the supposed home and the wall was larger by far than what he'd already crossed. That he wasn't even getting the harshest of the wards unnerved him. "Not sure how to proceed here."

Tonks sat on the level ground and considered the property quietly. Looking about, she could make out some small stands of trees, but mostly the area was flat, well tended by farms mostly, and offered little else to the eye. Some small hills presented themselves, but otherwise it was just gentle, tended land. The home itself obviously was warded well, to have been hidden all this time. Additionally, Tonks considered that what they were seeing wasn't really the home at all. Much like Grimmauld, perhaps there was an illusion to mask the property to those not within the charm. "I don't know much about wardbreaking. We usually have professionals do that, or the warders themselves. And what I remember of the Fidelius makes breaking it nearly impossible. You wouldn't know how or what to break."

"I don't expect we can just push our way into the wards," Harry grumbled, sitting beside the pretty witch. "And from what I know of Fidelius charms, there's no way to bypass or trick them."

"Wait." Her brows knit in thought, Tonks chewed on her lip briefly. "All a Fidelius does is contain the knowledge of a thing. So who knows, and who can know are limited. Right?"

"I think so," mulling it over, Harry shrugged. "I'm no expert. It seems right though."

"Let's assume it is," Tonks replied, warming to her idea. "Say, the idea of a Fidelius is to keep things that can know it, bound to it. So knowledge of a place, of a thing in the sense that it could be transmitted is bound." When Harry blinked at her in confusion, the former Auror just grinned back. "Remember Apparition practice? You used the trees behind Malfoy manor."

Realization hit him easily. "They may have warded the house and property, but there's likely grounds outside of them bound to the Potter bloodline here." At her nod, Harry grinned and leaned over, hugging the young witch, to her surprise. "I'll give it a try. Actually," eyeing the young woman intently, Harry pulled her along with himself to their feet. "I may need your help."

"I don't see how, I don't have even a slight tie to the Potter family, unlike the Blacks," she replied, watching him look over the wall with confusion.

Gesturing, Harry nodded slightly, "That's just it. You can help me by searching with me. That way I don't home in on false leads. If I'm just focusing on strong magic, you'll get that too. If it's just me, then I know there's something there."

Sensible, she admitted and started the trek about the wall with Harry. She reached out with her own limited senses, barely less refined than his, for any traces of what they'd come to call bloodlaw. Surprisingly, once in the proper state of mind the awareness of such things was much sharper, and she could sense Harry with greater clarity, but that only served to befuddle any other attempts she made to zero in on stray concentrations of power. He seemed to have the same problems, stumbling about in an attempt to focus with his eyes closed, Harry inadvertently got a rather good impression of how fit Tonks was under her robes.

Both of them blushing furiously, they continued the hunt without comment, and with eyes observantly open.

Nearly three hours later, Harry called off the search and pulled out a small satchel with some bread and water. "Break, need a break."

Rubbing at his temple, the young wizard pulled off his glasses and leaned back against a tree. "Nothing so far. This is irritating."

Nodding her agreement, Tonks tried to think of anything that may help Harry with his task. "Odd this," she thought out loud. "So long we've been taught that blood magic is dark, when it's actually the foundation for much of the ancient house structure."

"I know. I get the feeling the whole light versus dark magic issue is more a matter of perspective, and government planning than anything," he replied tiredly.

Grateful for the change in topic from their failed search, Tonks leaned back as well, taking a long drink of the water. "Explain, if you feel like it."

Waving faintly, Harry seemed hesitant to continue. "I guess I've been thinking more since we started studying that wandless magic book. It sounded like, long ago, people used magic that way more than with wands. Sure, it seemed less controlled, but now we're pretty much taught that without a wand, you're not a wizard."

"I see what you mean. Threats of having your wand snapped are serious. The Ministry uses that as a punishment, only second to Azkaban."

Nodding, Harry gestured to his own second wand, "And we've seen how well a new wand, after you've changed or grown, can be more suiting to a person."

"So just backwards thinking really," Tonks surmised. It did make sense though, as no wizard wanted to be considered a squib, and the threat of a wand snapping would make one nearly so. According to the Ministry. "So what you're saying, is a lot of the ideas of light and dark, are just ways for the ruling bodies and maybe others to keep knowledge of spells and what gets taught and is considered illegal, in fewer hands?"

"Isn't that what governments do?" Harry replied with a sardonic smile. "Sorry, must sound somewhat jaded."

Tonks shrugged slightly, "you have reason." Looking back out over the fields and sparse trees, she sighed and got back to her feet. "Shall we continue? Don't have much day left."

Harry wordlessly got to his feet, and she felt the spread of his awareness sweep over her with a shiver. Extending her own senses, Tonks set out beside him, only to nearly run over the young man in a dozen steps. "Hm?"

Looking somewhat pained, Harry closed his eyes and dropped to the ground. Spreading his hands out, he seemed to be feeling at some unseen thing beyond the foliage and leaf litter. "Here. Do you feel anything?" Shaking her head, Tonks dropped down beside him, and pushed at her senses, even going so far as to adjust her vision painfully into magesight. The brilliant lattice of the wards near them gave her a splitting headache immediately, and she could almost pick out the faint glow from below them, but didn't see anything definite. "It's under here, some distance."

"I can detect something," Tonks replied, releasing the changed-sight in her eyes with a groan. "Not sure what, but yeah. It didn't register when I was searching for bloodlaw traces. Only magic." Pulling out a light headache draught, she tipped the vial back and closed her eyes for a few moments. "You think this is it?"

Nodding, Harry only dug his fingers a bit harder into the earth. "I can make something out," though, it was muddy, he definitely felt they'd stumbled on precisely what he was looking for. Remembering the sensations of when he'd first touched the magic, Law as Narcissa had called it, bloodlaw as he was coming to think of it, Harry opened himself up but focused his mind on that space under him and those feelings. It wasn't like the Black bloodlaw, eager almost to flood him and fill him to bursting. This was a hesitant brush, like a testing probe of magic.

Settling down on hands and knees, Harry leaned his forehead down to the turf and concentrated. The ground around him seemed to breathe up at him, all the small stones and blades of grass and scant

trees swaying and bending in the sudden breeze reacting like the hairs on his neck raising.

Reacting to him like a threat, the power he sought spun away, leaving a void in the places it had been. Harry, trying to chase after it, was drawn in. It wasn't the sudden, mind-splitting feeling Grimmauld was, but this had a certain peculiarity too. It was different. Where the Black bloodlaw was eager and waiting, this was hesitant. Unwilling. Each blade of grass that Harry scrutinized with his senses seemed to hold that awareness, a lambent magic that was sucked back and away from him. Each time, he took up that pebble, this leaf, that bit of loam, and let his mind trickle into the emptiness and vacuum of magic like water seeping into dry earth.

If the magic drained from this place, he figured, then he'd fill it back up again. The process sped as each thing's awareness spread to the area around it, and he bound them all to himself. This was the way, he imagined, wizards once claimed and warded land. They didn't erect bubbles of force and ritual over a building and expect it to protect them. They became the land, the home, the earth and air. Harry breathed a great sigh of air, scenting the far field and steam, the Loch so close, the gentle roll of earth under him.

As if such a thing were second nature to him, Harry gently reached out, slipped his sense of self into those things, and let his name, the idea of his own self bind to them. As he left each, they remained anchored to his mind, to his intrinsic self. That feeling of his tree, the image he had of his magic set down tentative roots, and where they struck land, it spread out tiny branches and shoots. Delicate, but binding things. Without a sense of time, Harry took his leisure in exploring the area. When he was satisfied that the only thing left, the reservoir of the power he'd sought was pooled into that great blackness before him signifying the Fidelius, he sat and relaxed. Drained of any sense of self, the young wizard became that place he sat upon. Became the land and air and earth. As the power, the bloodlaw relaxed in it's reaction, it spread back out to reclaim what it had left, and revitalize with magic the place it was a part of.

What waited for it, and what it filled up was Harry.

Through this process, Tonks was aghast. Harry had seemed distracted and unsure, even outright odd when he kneeled down and dug his fingers into the dirt. When he'd bowed down and she felt a powerful surge and response of magic around him, the former Auror had assumed the worst and thought that the wards were triggered or that perhaps he'd found some trap. Kneeling down, she'd tried to shake him back to awareness...

He was solid, rooted like a stone. Panic rising in her chest, she tried to shove him sideways and only managed to dig furrows in the spongy loam with her efforts. Glancing about frantically, she looked for any sign of what could be happening, when the sudden flush of power around her made the young witch gasp.

Harry was gone. Blinking as her mouth worked silently, Tonks fell to her knees where he'd been and felt at the ground frantically. It was still warm where he'd been. Forcing her vision back into it's painful magesight, she scanned about quickly and had to shake her head hard at what she saw.

There, embracing the wards as if it were some lost friend, was a ghostly, faint image of what had to be Harry. As she watched, the impression shifted and sank slowly into the ground and dispersed, settling around her like dew on morning grass. Nothing she'd detected hinted at this being any kind of dark or dangerous magic, but she knew better than to assume.

She also had no idea what to do. Wrenching her sight back to normal, she fell at the sudden sharp pain in her temple. Cursing the side effects of forcing her body into such things, the young woman waited for the accompanying nausea to pass and considered her options. Seeing little she could really do, that would help her friend, she decided to still her own worry and wait. Hopefully, he knew what he was doing.

Harry felt the surge of the bloodlaw filling him and realized, he had no idea what he was doing. Where before each thing he touched had little of it's own self, it simply was, this was like realizing the hill you built your house upon was a slumbering giant. The power pulsed into things, making them alive in ways Harry almost envied. As it did so, it

also touched him, spread into the idea of him, as he was spread about the place itself. Each time he seemed to lose something, and gain something else. A disincorporate idea that he'd lose himself in this and just be another shade of power in the land flickered into his mind, but was driven out as more of him became part of it.

It was like a wave, he thought briefly. When he'd pushed, the tide had went out, and he walked on the sand freely. Now, the tide returned, and the undertow would claim him. Feeling momentary panic, he let his most condensed self pool into one of those places already taken, and with a mighty press of will, dived against the coming wave.

The effect was amazing and immediate. Seeing Harry as being only part of the land it claimed, the bloodlaw accepted him without resistance. His idea of self crashed against and through wards that may have well been fog, for all they held against him. Still, his ideal wasn't to break the wards, but to retake the bloodlaw itself, hoping that doing so would finish what he'd started with simple wills of his parents.

Again, that familiar power swept into and through him. Where he had been rocks and grass, he was now also mortar, magic and space, with windows and a roof. Rising up and beyond that immediate surge of connection, as every bone and tendon in him creaked with boled wood and old masonry, Harry scented at the connection, seeking out other places. Other pools of himself. When they answered him, welcoming and warm, it was like seeing Hermione and Ron at King's Cross station in the fall all over again.

Night had fallen a few hours ago, and Tonks had started a small campfire, hoping that the blaze wouldn't bring with it any undue attention. She'd considered trying her hand at breaking the wards, or trying to find Harry with the lingering connection to the Black bloodlaw she held with him, but decided against it. She was as new to this as him, and doing that may wrench him out of whatever state he was in, bonding with his Potter ancestry. Still, the fact it had been nearly three hours since Harry had simply disappeared was worrying her quite a bit. Panic had nearly had her fleeing back to London and the Order, but she realized doing that would only betray Harry's trust in her. She had to just wait, hope and believe he'd be alright.

Shortly before what seemed like eight o'clock, a weary, if smiling Harry stumbled into the firelight, seemingly out of nowhere and collapsed at her side, startling her out of her staring at the embers badly. Stilling her yell, the young woman fell down beside Harry, pulling his head to her lap, "Hey... hey are you OK?"

Mumbling faintly, the Boy-Who-Lived nodded ever so slightly, and turned, tucking an arm around her waist. Blushing madly, Tonks made to move him, but paused, seeing the strangest expression on his face.

Contentment. He had seemed peaceful, often, when there were times she'd caught him sleeping in their time so far this summer, but this was the difference between night and day. Pursing her lips, Tonks conjured a few cushions, and leaned back against them, letting her fingers idle in Harry's unruly mop of hair.

An hour later, Harry began the slow journey back to wakefulness. This was urged on by the rather unusual sensation of warmth around him, and someone tickling his ear with his own hair. "Eystoppit," he managed to get out, cracking an eye at the offending hand.

"Mm, at least you don't drool in your sleep, Harry," her voice seemed as sleep-think as his, and with a small start, just enough to get his eyes open, Harry realized where he was. "Shh. Stay a bit. You seemed to have relaxed and needed some time after what you did," something in Tonks' voice made him still, more than what she said. Nodding very slightly, Harry settled back where he'd been.

"It was... different. Not at all like Grimmauld and the Blacks," he murmured, as her hand made soothing motions on his temple. Sometime while he was asleep, she'd stolen his glasses. He'd yet to miss them, terribly. "I really don't know what happened, other than when I started feeling it, the bloodlaw ran. It tried to evade me. So I took up where it had been, till it couldn't hold itself or bounced back... whatever it did, it washed over me, and since I was tied up in all the things it had been a part of..."

Chuckling quietly, Tonks nodded. "Never occurred to you it would just set you back out on your arse?"

It was his turn to laugh now. "No. I wasn't considering failing, so it never came to mind." Though that did bring up a question, but one for another day. "I have it now. It's... exhausting. Like cramming for tests. Only literally it's all getting crammed into my head. Like... " going still a moment, Harry smirked as Tonks jumped.

Before, there had been a particularly uncomfortable, yet badly placed stick under her hip. It was tolerable, but the hour of sitting on it had made the place sore. Suddenly, the offending thing was gone, and Harry was holding up a small branch. "Throw this on the fire. It's been bothering you too long."

Blinking, she wandlessly banished it gently into the flames. "How did you know?"

Looking back up at the young woman, Harry simply blinked once, slowly. "I'm still, for some reason, connected to the bloodlaw of your family. I can still feel things, if they're strong enough, just by being around you." Tonks blushed, but kept her mind rigidly to neutral ground, after that bit of information. Legilimency was one thing, but to be able to passively read people... As if reading her, which could be likely, Harry shook his head. "It's not like that. It's more... "

As she waited for him to continue, he closed his eyes and with a slight smirk, she heard his voice, faintly echoing from where he was, "Merlin, she has a comfortable lap."

Tonks eyes went wide and she blushed a bit more. "That was very odd, Harry. But ah... thank you."

Grinning sheepishly, Harry's face relaxed from it's intent focus. "It's hard to focus so hard. Only the really... loud things, I guess, I even pick up. Obviously, it works both ways. I imagine it's like that for anyone in the family who's very close."

"May explain Fred and George," she murmured.

Nodding, Harry continued, "And as for the branch, anything that the magic is bound to, is bound to... well me. It was the same with the Black bloodlaw, but this is more natural. I'm also more aware of it, after the last week of practice."

Tonks smirked a bit. "I imagine the knowledge you don't have to give this heritage up helps you be comfortable with it, then?"

"Immensely," Harry replied with a sigh. He felt guilty indulging in the comfort of Tonks' lap, but was slow to give it up. Judging by her reaction as he woke, she was just as hesitant. His color rose slightly, thinking about their position, and how close it was. "Tonks..."

Her eyes opening where they'd slid shut, the young witch looked down, her lip quirking slightly. "Mm?"

Mouth going dry, Harry shook his head, and the image that had crept up on him faded. "Nothing. I think I should key you to the wards soon, so we don't have to sit out here by firelight all night." Her faint sense of disappointment washed over him, and he wondered exactly how strong that bond was.

He wondered at how little hesitation or anxiety the idea of there even being one, affected him.

Standing and stretching out the small kinks from laying on the ground, Harry looked back to the property and shook his head. "Still not what I was expecting. Ah... oh. Lets try the simple way first." Grinning impishly, Harry gestured to the small ramshackle with a flourish. "Welcome to my new home."

Though it may have been oddly phrased, the invitation and the intent carried the will of the magic that bound the charms and wards themselves to the place. Before her eyes, the low stone wall shifted and shuddered, suddenly shooting up as if pushed from below almost a meter over her. There, they stopped and seemed to shed the rough layers of outer stone, revealing smooth, if nondescript gray basaltic rock beneath. Beyond, she could see the small home undergoing similar throes of growth, walls and corners hunching then springing like stretching cats. The home itself was ancient, the walls mostly the

same gray and smooth stone of the boundary that surrounded the place. In places, the walls seemed to twist and stretch, and Tonks realized what she was seeing was a single, wide tower shuddering loose from the remaining structure. Finally, the motion seemed to settle and her vision took in the result, less a home as a keep, the kind of thing one would expect in the middle of some feudal barony.

"I had this grand idea of a palatial mansion, like the Malfoys. Or maybe something like a smaller version of Hogwarts, or maybe some outlandish thing like the Burrow," Harry admitted, his eyes showing his amusement. "This, though seems right."

It was, for lack of a better word, plain. Simple stone, simple walls, but fitting in the time period of it's building, she assumed. Considering the countryside, it wasn't a far stretch to consider the place easily fulfilling the role of barony to the local farmers, herders and workers. There were the obvious signs of magic, in that the windows were segmented and apparently, animated glass. Some of the trees within the walls seemed magical. There was even a small crest above the main door, what she assumed to be the Potter family arms. "Yeah, I think I see what you mean."

Gesturing her forward with him, Harry gingerly stepped between the large gates that served to separate the inner ward from the land beyond and stopped, looking about at the place his ancestors, perhaps even his mother and father had called home. Eyes going misty, Harry hurried forward, with Tonks close behind.

"Beggings your pardon, but whos is yous?"

The small voice and odd speech had Harry already smiling, as he bent down to regard the small elf that had appeared outside the home to meet them. "My name is Harry Potter. And what is your name?"

The little creature's eyes went huge and in an instant, she was bawling, clinging to Harry's leg. Tonks smirked and nudged him in the arm, "Seems that Cho's reaction to you wasn't as strange as you thought."

Glaring at his friend as she shifted her face to a puffy-eyed and bedraggled looking semblance of his first crush, Harry sighed. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to get the half-hysterical elf to release him, "have I done something wrong?"

Sniffing mightily, the little creature shook its head hard. "No's sir. We is just glad to have a master back."

Grimacing at the title, Harry regardless didn't bother to try and comment on the little elf's address of him. He wasn't ready for another bout of waterworks. "I see, I'm glad to see how well the estate looks after so long. Was all this your work?" When the elf nodded, he grinned again, "Well then, I'll need a name to properly say thank you."

"I's named Jilly, sir. Oftens mistresses of the house calls me just Jill though." Still sniffing, the elf regardless made the effort to speak clearly.

Harry looked over to Tonks with an amused expression. "OK Jilly. We're very new here, and could use some help. Do you know how we got through the wards?"

Nodding, the little elf looked between the two and settled on Harry's knees as a safe place to focus. "You's the right master now. The magic in the house knows it, so I's knows it. I's was just worried you be a powerful bad wizard that could make the house forget its right masters."

"Can you show us the house?"

Scooting away from Harry, the little elf nodded and proceeded to open the main doors, beckoning them along. Unable to hide his smile and excitement, Harry hurried after with a curious Tonks in tow.

Inside, the keep seemed a bit warmer in personality than out. Burgundy and gold banners and decorative, sometimes magical tapestries hung along the stone walls, and the rooms themselves sometimes had walls paneled in woods that complemented the furnishings. Harry had expected some epiphany about his family or

his ancestry from just walking about the keep, but was realizing that to be silly. This seemed more the the home of his grandparents, with it's furnishings and the odd portrait of what had to be family members he didn't know. Trailing about behind Jilly, he tried to take it all in, and connect with it on a level other than magical, but in truth... it just didn't seem to be happening.

By the time they reached the bedrooms and guest rooms, Tonks was noticing the change in his demeanor and asked Jilly if she could make them a small snack, in the kitchens and wait for them there. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Shaking his head, the young man just gestured about at the room they'd stopped inside. "This could have been my grandmother's room, but... I don't feel anything. It's just a room."

"Did you expect to feel something, Harry?" She asked mildly.

Shrugging, Harry just sat heavily on the edge of the ornate bed. "I don't know. I mean, I've imagined what it would be like, to have these things. History, heritage and a past that was more than a photo album and stories. It... just doesn't feel like mine anymore."

"Harry," sitting beside him, Tonks pulled his hand into hers and held it a moment. "This is just a house. A place. You've never been here, that you remember. Born here, yes. Maybe spent some time here, but a place isn't home just because of those things. Home is memories."

Nodding sadly, Harry realized she was right. The closest he'd come to that ideal of home was Hogwarts. With slightly sick lurch, he had to admit that he had a stronger sense of connection to the Dursley's home than this place. Despite those ideals, there was one thing here that wasn't at either one of those places. His family had lived here. Generations of Potters had made this their home, and each had left something behind. Despite not feeling something fundamental slide into place, Harry was grateful of the legacy. He knew that in time, perhaps this place, or some other of the Potter homes scattered about could be his.

As they were heading down to the kitchens, the sensation of something crossing the wards momentarily startled Harry. "Huh, an owl... lets hurry." As they entered the small dining room, much different than the large dining hall apparently set aside for many guests or relatives, they saw Jilly opening the window for the familiar shape of a Gringott's owl. The bird seemed to be in a light daze, simply holding it's message out to be taken without any notice of those there. Crossing to the bird, Harry took the note and wasn't surprised to see the owl take off immediately to leave.

Shrugging to Tonks, he unrolled the small note.

Lord Potter,

If this note has come to your possession, then congratulations on assuming your rightful title and and lands, as per the clauses outlined in your parent's will and the associated conditions. Assumption of his negates the original secret-keeper charms on the bank's officials and the elves in the House's employ. That privilege is now yours. The Stewardship of the lands, estate and holdings has been nullified, now that a rightful and vested heir has claimed them.

As always, an updated tally and record of all account access and history is available at your request, at any Gringott's branch. If you do require assistance, please feel free to Owl or Floo, or visit us directly.

Sliding the note over to Tonks, he picked up a roll and spread some jam onto it. "Well that's that I suppose. I figure there was some other way to do this but if it worked... well I can't complain."

"Yeah, but one thing worries me, Harry," setting down her knife, Tonks looked back out the window. "Dumbledore had some kind of tie to the bloodlaw. Wouldn't he still? I don't expect him to be able to fully take that from you, but..."

Nodding, Harry bit his lip and thought about that. "Well. If he does have something connected to it, some artifact or item, then... maybe I can just shut it off. I have control of it now, and the magic of the Fidelius and the estates themselves recognize me. I suppose the

Goblins had some way to monitoring that, and obviously there's like a deadman switch to it, or we'd not have gotten that letter.

"Still, you're right. I don't like the idea of him having something so intrinsically tied to me and my bloodline." Absently nibbling on a piece of bread with a distant look, Harry shook his head. "I think... it may be time to have that meeting."

"While he's still reeling from having the Order called into public scrutiny and from just having you usurp his claim on your birthright," smirking, Tonks couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Dumbledore. For all his vaulted plans, if he'd not pushed Harry so far, perhaps something of the relationship with the young man could have been salvaged. "Have you ever wondered why he tried to hard?"

"Dumbledore?" Pausing, Harry regarded his tea solemnly in thought. "I suppose he puts a lot of stock in prophecies. More than common sense." With that conversation lapsed and the two finished their small meal, thanking Jilly – who seemed mortified that her new master was so polite.

Deciding that it was a good time to test the other aspects of his key, Harry figured the small flat that somewhat resembled Grimmauld, located in London would be a good place to stop off, on their way back to Diagon. Bidding Jilly farewell, Harry hesitantly placed the key into the pantry door and gave it a gentle turn.

They could both feel a kind of odd displacement settle behind the door, and to Harry it felt very much like what he'd imagine having someone nearby Apparate. Looking back to his companion in so many of these odd recent adventures, Harry grinned. "Here goes nothing."

Swinging open the door, they were met with not stored foodstuffs and odd things usually found in a pantry, but with a deep, impenetrable dark that seemed to suck at the light of the room. Figuring it silly to start something and not finish it, Harry stepped forward grinning as Tonks took his hand and followed just behind.

It was at once like a portkey and not, and the sense of displacement was only heightened by the distance from the tie he'd just made to that other place so strongly. He'd been tied to the other properties as well, but with the way he'd spread himself, binding even the land into his magic it was disorienting to suddenly be so far away. Stumbling more from that than his usual post-transit clumsiness, Harry fell face first, for the second time that day, and was subjected to his friend's snickering behind him. "Yeah I know."

"You have the worst luck with that," Tonks quipped, looking about at the cozy flat with a small smile. "Forgive me for being a city girl, but this is an improvement to the stately Potter keep, at least in my eyes."

Admittedly, there was a more lived-in sense about the place, Harry observed. He knew from the bloodlaw that the home was in Camden Town, near King's Cross and south some distance from Grimmauld. Looking around at the displayed house colors, odd Hogwarts pictures, a few empty bottles used as vases and the rather haphazard furnishings, Harry grinned. "It feels like a common room."

"You think it's like a middle ground, like a place for students at Hogwarts to go on vacations or over summers?"

"Or a place more in the middle of things. For people who have more fondness for cities, as you said." Looking around, Harry decided this was much an improvement on the other property. "I'd like to look around more, but I spent too much time today. We can come back tomorrow, but we should head back to our flat, and start making preparations, and see if there's any news of the plan."

With that said, the two took one last look around, and with her hand on his arm, Tonks Apparated them back to 93 Diagon.

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A/N: Few things that are valid questions I wanted to answer. Nothing spoilerific, but this stuff should be obvious enough so that detailing it

a little won't hurt. Or just good discussion. Also, I may spend a bit of time shortly working on Vermilion and Iron Will, but we'll see.

Political!Harry? God I hate the blah!Harry pidgeonholing... can't we just leave it as fanfic!Harry and let it go? No, Harry's not going into politics. It was a necessary evil, and he had a lot of help. Now that he's managed to find someone to shove the Black lordship on, don't expect him to dabble in it more than is absolutely needed. It was also necessary to get some plot elements in place.

Wandless magic.. dropped? Nope, just too much going on to really get into it. He's not had a need to use it much, and being still in the mindset of thinking he shouldn't be, he hasn't been. With the reading done, he's been focusing on a whirlwind of other problems, like the Wizengamot, the Bloodlaw, and a few other things, that magic won't fix. He'll get back to it. After all, it's one more thing he can do, that may tip the scales.

Super-wand? Not really. Just more suited to his new state of mind, and the things he'd been through. The materials make more sense when you think about their source, and his experiences. He's also just a tad on the powerful side, if a bit ignorant and despising of those same things, since they set him apart.

The Death sentence? Necessary for later. Extreme, more so than should be really, but one can infer it was long overdue. Those taking his mark, obviously share his goals, or appear to as far as society can tell. We've yet to enter into the conscription stage. As collaborators to what is essentially genocide and terrorism, you can see how a swayed Wizengamot may be forced, or choose on it's own, to begin Veiling those that side with Voldemort. Or, maybe I'm just an extremist who does not much think second chances are such a good thing for people, in some cases. Hard to say!

Am I in politics? Oh god I think I just threw up in my mouth a little. No, no, I'm just a very tactical thinker. It looks like politics from a distance. Oh great now you have me thinking about it...

Dumbledore the Dark Lord? No. Emphatic no. But, he is human. Being great, you either die a hero, or live long enough to become a villain. In it's own way, his choice of action and inaction are doing this.

Chapter Thirteen

Traveling is not just seeing the new; it is also leaving behind. Not just opening doors; also closing them behind you, never to return. But the place you have left forever is always there for you to see whenever you shut your eyes.

– Jan Myrdal

Standing before Grimmauld after what felt like ages made Harry check his wands and the key around his neck again. Though it was late, and he was tired from his work that day, the meeting wasn't something he could ignore.

Moody had left word that something big was going on, and that Harry should, if he intended to confront the man at all, do so tonight. Although his reasoning wasn't so much to confront, as to say his peace with Tonks and hopefully either bury the hatchet with Dumbledore and the Order for good, or sever ties, Harry took the former Auror's words for what they were. Rather than recoup back in the flat, Tonks took him to Grimmauld, and Harry in turn led them to the Order's headquarters. Though Tonks could still remember things from the day she was Obliviated, thanks to her timely use of a Pensieve, the Fidelius wasn't so easy to trick. Besides, she figured, it wasn't like she needed to come back here, after tonight.

Harry fidgeted with his robes again, and Tonks shoved him forward. "C'mon, we need to get it over with. We were ready when we left the flat."

"I know, it's just nerve wracking. I don't know if the key will get us through a transport ward. I don't know what they'll do."

Tonks simply nodded, but grinned regardless of Harry's worry, "Well, that's why we left notices with Rufus, Amelia and Narcissa, even a few of your opponents, isn't it? In case something does go wrong, enough people will know to do something about it. I don't think he'll go that far though."

"Hope you're right," Harry mumbled, repressing the urge to check his wands again. Letting Tonks take hold of his arm, he strode up to the

doorway, waiting for the buildings to shove themselves around and let number fourteen have it's room. Reaching up, Harry knocked soundly on the door, hoping desperately that his letter had been received before he arrived.

Amber-flecked gray eyes peered back, from the slide on the door. "Oh good you're early." The door opened, revealing an even shabbier, even more weary looking Remus Lupin than he remembered. "Come in, come in. I'd get you tea, but we need to secret you away quickly. Cloak?"

Harry nodded and pulled the garment from his belt, tossing it over himself and Tonks. Remus nodded smartly and led the way back to the sitting room. "Good, he can see through those, but only if you can be seen. There's a hide behind that bookcase, pull out the book In Sheep's Clothing, and it should swing out. Good, now before you shut it, your signal will be a loud bang, followed by the portrait waking up. See you then."

The rushed conversation had taken barely a minute, and then Harry found himself, under a cloak, stuffed into a tiny nook with a very amused metamorph. "Well. I hope he's planning on signaling us sooner, as opposed to later," Harry ventured, only to get an elbow in the ribs. "Ou, what was that for."

"For implying I'm not good company," Tonks replied archly, but again started giggling. "Sorry, always had to take a calming draught before a stakeout, to keep the giggles down."

"Yeah," raising a brow, Harry filed that tidbit away, but focused on another line of thought, he'd not allowed himself till recently. "Tonks, could I ask you a serious question? I don't know how this meeting is going to go, and I'd like... well to know, before. If it's alright."

Nodding, the young witch stilled, recognizing the unsure and somewhat hesitant manner in which Harry was acting. Through the last week, they'd plotted, planned and practiced, all with a solid confidence of determination that would make Hermione and Moody proud, but here, now Harry was practically shaking like a leaf. "What

is it," she asked simply, Harry's nervousness rubbing off on her as well.

Taking a breath, Harry closed his eyes and let his words spill forth, "I wondered why it is, you have been so supportive of me. Why you're still with me, despite the things that happened, and all that you've lost, over this."

Oh he would ask the hard ones right before leaping in the lion's den, she cursed silently. "I... well."

"I really don't mind, don't take it like that. I mean, it's been great having this time to be with you. Work with you. I mean," shaking his head, Harry would have loved to be able to knock his forehead into a wall, if not for needing to be relatively quiet. "I like being around you. I like-"

"Harry?"

"-mean it's like, I've got my best mates, my friends and the people in the DA, but I worry about getting them involved. I mean I worry about you too! But I guess it really helps that you were an Auror and have more real-world-"

"Harry."

"I'm sorry," hanging his head a bit, the Boy-Who-Lived, took a deep breath and looked back up at the witch, smiling wryly at him. "Sorry."

"Shut. Up." Leaning forward, the young woman paused, barely brushing her lips across his before leaning back and regarding him, her eyes catching what little light there was in the nook. "I would try to explain better, but I don't trust myself yet. For now... can we let it go there? I want to be a part of this. Can that be enough, for now?"

Mouth working silently for a moment, Harry just nodded dumbly and tried to let his mind catch up to the moment that had just happened. She kissed him? It was barely a kiss, but... it was a kiss! Blinking rapidly, Harry's mind sped back over the last few months, putting new angles, trying to see different lights on their time. Remembering the night he'd come back in late, in the Department of Mysteries with their

hosts, he blushed madly and could only close his eyes, remembering all he'd seen. "Yeah. It's enough. Thank you, for being here."

"No where else I'd rather be," she replied quietly, mind doing a quiet mirror to Harry's own. Tonks hoped he'd not take it the wrong way, considering their somewhat awkward moments, but she really did like him. He was comfortable, bright, didn't ask too much of her, and was grateful of what she did give. There wasn't much she could ask for otherwise, in a friend, but that was the problem, really.

She's never thought of him, in the same way as her friends. Sure, there were parallels in thinking, and for a while she hid her own motivations behind a wall of maternal instinct, and a sense of moral right, but... lies, even to oneself are lies. Deep down, she knew this was a stupid time to spring such a thing on him, but he did ask.

And, to be honest, she did want to tell him.

An uneasy silence slid down around them, as the minutes dragged on. It was all Harry could do not to let his brain kick into some odd direction, as the only noise he could hear was her breathing, and the only thing he could feel, other than the wall to his right, was her side pressed up against his own. "Ah, do you remember what we planned?" Trying to break the silence, he recalled the real reason, other than the pleasant aside in a dark nook, that they were there.

Voicing her agreement, Tonks nodded, "Yeah, I do. You'll say your peace, I'll keep an eye for any weirdness, using the blood bond to the home as an anchor, and when it's my turn, you do the same. We use the key in an emergency, if I get separated, use the blood bond to Apparate, in case they use some anti-transport spells. Hope that I don't get splinched since we haven't tried that yet."

"Considering, I think it would work alright. If anything, just get to the door, inside the house. It'll confuse them enough to give you time to cross the main wards." Running a hand through his hair nervously, Harry grinned, "It's a lot different than planning, being here. I hope it goes well."

"Me too. I hear people, shh."

It seemed that the meeting that Dumbledore had called was beginning to happen, or at least those invited were making their way about. More than once Harry heard the Floo flare up and the clomping steps of someone exiting it. A few muted hellos, some broken conversation reached them as well.

"...not sure why... Doge? ...he doing you think?" Molly's voice, somewhat high and easy to place, sounded easiest to pick up.

A lower, harder to hear voice, probably one of the male members of the Order answered, but other than the neutral tone, little could be heard.

More shuffling of footsteps and then silence let the conspirators know that likely the meeting was in order. "Soon you think?"

"Probably," his companion answered quietly. Making a mental note, Tonks smiled. Perhaps if they did something like this again, they should both take calming draughts.

A score of minutes after the meeting may have begun, a loud bang, followed by the insensate scream of annoyance from the portrait of Mrs. Black let them know that it was time. As quickly as they could, Harry and Tonks slid out of the nook, and he folded his cloak back into this belt. Smoothing each other's clothing, they shared a nod when they were ready, and marched into the kitchen side by side.

The initial confusion as to what had awoken the portrait turned to mild shock when from the other doorway, a grim-faced Harry and Tonks seemed to simply materialize. "Good afternoon everyone."

Playing out their roles well, Remus and Moody stood quickly as if to launch spells at the two, and were set back down by body-binds, from Harry and Tonks. Eyeing the rest of the room, the two made it clear they weren't going to deal with more of the same. "That well out of everyone's system?" Harry's question met an equally confused and shocked room, as what had just happened registered.

"I believe so, Harry. Will you join us tonight, peacefully? Professor Snape had some urgent news to pass along." Dumbledore's words carried equal parts question and order, but it didn't seem to phase the two who stood, wands still drawn on the room. "Can we put you at ease?"

"Oh, yes that would be simple. Place your wands on the table." When no one seemed intent on complying, Harry shrugged and kept his own trained on the room. "Your choice, then."

Looking about the room, Dumbledore didn't let show the annoyance and frustration that this week, and Harry himself were causing. "Please, Harry, Ms. Tonks, You are among friends here-"

Snorting, Harry chuckled darkly. "Really. Explain Doge."

Eyes narrowing a moment, Albus made to reply but Harry cut him off with a wave of his wand. "Not you. Arthur. What were your orders?"

Looking to the Headmaster briefly, Arthur turned to regard Harry sadly. "We were to incapacitate and bring you back to Grimmauld if you were found."

Tonks spoke up this time, her eyes narrowing angrily, "Why? What possible justification could you have for that?"

"You can't be serious, Nympha-"

"I suggest you rethink that, Molly." Her tone reminded Harry of the icy calm that she'd affected in her Unspeakable disguise, and the memory almost made him smile. It was an effort not to, as the Weasley matriarch's eyes widened, when Tonks' wand snapped toward her. Though he thought of Molly as the most likened to a mother he could know, the woman had a very faint grasp on the world, beyond her apron strings. It was far too dangerous a time, for that kind of short-sightedness.

Huffing, the older woman's lips drew into a fine line. "Very well. You should know, Tonks, that Harry would never behave this way, on his

own. Practically throwing his inheritance back at Voldemort! He hates the Malfoys!"

"Actually I really dislike Draco, but only because he's an immature git. Lucius... yeah I hated him," shrugging, Harry conceded the point but didn't lower his wand from Dumbledore. "Funny thing about that, not that I'm sure anyone has verified it, but Narcissa wasn't terribly fond of the bootlicking fop either. Lucius I mean." Tonks couldn't keep a straight face at that one, and snickered quietly.

This it seemed, was the queue Snape had been looking for to voice his own concerns. "Indeed. Though, I wonder how long it will take for the Dark Lord to pressure her back into place."

"Well that depends, Severus, how much pressure are you going to put on your godson to take his mark?"

The result he wanted was easy to get, as everyone's eyes turned to regard the lank-haired man. "I will not press another to that end. The Headmaster knows-

"Exactly what you want him to," Harry retorted angrily. "Narcissa, though not a model citizen, is a very, very devoted mother. Do you know why I can trust her?" Waiting a moment, Harry snapped the answer to his own question at them, "Because she loves her son. She will do anything, anything in her power to keep him from the same path as his father. What about you, Snivellus? What will you do, when faced with the choice of your godson's life and your own?"

Lip quivering in rage, the man stood slowly and stared, piercingly at the young wizard. "Do not pretend to know me so well as to predict my actions, boy."

"What I do know is you lie to your Lord, and you lie to us. So far, Narcissa's loyalty has been ironclad. So, given the choice of betrayal and selfishness, and a mother's love," Harry purposefully swept his eyes from Molly to Dumbledore, letting them draw their own conclusions for his meaning, "I choose her. Seemed simple, really."

Holding up his hands, Dumbledore seemed to be trying to ease not just Harry but the others at the table as well. "Let's be civil, everyone. I would like to proceed with the meeting if our friends think they would be able to be kind enough to treat us as peers and not hostages."

"Peers? Civil?" Tonks practically spat the words at the man. "How is Obliviating me, Obliviating Moody and having him do the same to those in the Ministry, forcing me out of a job-" her own wand swiveled with Harry's dangerously as the man dipped his hand toward his robe. "Ah ah... So. Tell us again about civility and respect, Albus. I would love to hear it."

Sighing heavily, Dumbledore cursed the day he ever took the young woman into the Order, thinking her talents would be valuable. "I did what I need to, to ensure events played out properly. If you had continued as an Auror, it would be a conflict with the Order and eventually someone, either you or us would slip up. It was necessary to ensure not just your own, but our safety."

"Remus, if I unbind you, do you swear on your magic to do what I ask, as long as no one comes to harm?"

Looking about himself warily, the Werewolf replied his compliance. Harry pulled a small vial from his robes, and canceled his body-bind on the former teacher. "Take this. Three drops on Moody's tongue."

"I cannot allow-"

"Shut up," cutting off the Headmaster quietly, Harry glared at the man, and none present would have stepped between at the intensity of Harry's glare. "If I have to dose you as well, to get the truth of things, by Merlin I'll do it!" A collective gasp rose at the table at that, and Harry held his glare, as Tonks observed Lupin and Moody warily.

Arthur sighed, shaking his head in resignation. "Harry, why don't you trust him?"

"Because, he's given me no reason to."

The simple answer quieted the room, as Lupin did his duty and sat back at the table, warily watching the proceedings.

Moody's face took on a somewhat odd look, and Harry realized the man was smiling slightly. It looked off on his face. "Please state your name."

"Alastor Moody."

Nodding, Harry settled his back to the wall and continued, "How long have you known Dumbledore?"

The veteran Auror seemed to consider that a moment. "Since I was attending Hogwarts."

Looking back to the Headmaster, he asked his first pointed query, "Why did you Obliviate the people in the Ministry who had knowledge of Tonks' arrest?"

Albus looked to speak, but Harry jabbed his wand out and wordlessly cast a silence charm on the man, replacing his calm facade with mild shock. "Dumbledore ordered it, to cover the failed arrest that would have been in the Wizengamot the next day."

The reaction to that single statement would have been worth all the work, on its own. But Harry was far from done. "Quiet, quiet!" Slamming his fist into the wall, the angry young wizard finally calmed the outraged room, and knowing the charm would not hold more than a moment more with Dumbledore working to counter it, released his silencing charm. "So. What do you say to this, Dumbledore?"

"I cannot say anything. I have no idea what Moody's speaking of."

Tonks took this moment to pull out her compact, smirking and tossing it onto the table. "Moody, what is this, and what have you done with it?"

"It's a small, limited use Pensieve. You let me use it in case Dumbledore Obliviated me, after I failed at the Ministry. He did, and I recovered my memory with it. "

Albus seemed to deflate here, and shook his head sadly. "What, old man? What do you have to say to that? What excuse?" The venom in Harry's words was obvious, and even he had to admit, his anger was getting the better of him. Tonks' hand on his arm calmed him, reminded him what their goal was tonight.

"How do we know you've not changed his memory, Harry? You're so angry with me, so unpredictable, so unlike yourself. How do you think this looks?"

Snarling quietly, Harry swapped his wand to the other hand and raised his right, "I swear on my magic that neither I, nor anyone I know other than Albus Dumbledore has altered Alastor Moody's memory," a bright flare of magic snapped over him, and Harry placed his wand back in his right hand, willing a small spray of sparks. It complied, as he narrowed his eyes at the Headmaster. "Care to try that oath as well, Albus?"

His silence was all the answer anyone needed. "How can you justify treating people like this? How? Should I ask Moody about the other things, that obviously you don't want to come to light? Should I ask about Ginny?"

That was the breaking point, and with a surge of magic, Albus stood tall and nearly flared with contained rage. "Enough!"

The damage was done though. Molly and Arthur had their wands out, as did Kingsley and the few others from the Ministry. All told, the only people not pointing a wand at the man, were Moody due to his body-bind, and Severus who was woefully surprised at the turn of events. "No, it's not Dumbledore," Harry said softly, shrugging off the reaction to the magic in the room. "You could have done a lot, with us, to make us loyal, to keep us with you, with your goals. If they were as noble as we were to believe. But you chose to deceive, to manipulate, to force people into your plans. Why? What is it you can't let us know that would endanger you?"

Glaring at Harry, the man seemed to calm but only slightly. "I do what I must, for the light. I know what has to be done. I know what evil is, what must happen to counter it."

"So you hold a monopoly on good?" Rolling his eyes, Harry didn't bother to hold his wand on the man anymore. "God damnit, will you just reason with us!" And to Harry's surprise, others in the room were nodding as well. "People believe in you, Dumbledore. They believe in the man that saved them from Grindelwald. Why won't you work with us, rather than trying to play us like a game?"

Moody's voice split the silence, and their questions. He had still been under the serum, and was aware of the questions Harry would ask. Hell, he wanted the old bastard to come clean too. Dumbledore was a great wizard, a real champion for good and the rights of those who deserved it, back in his day. Time and his own guilt, something Moody knew too well, had taken their toll on him. So, figuring he owed everyone here, not just himself, the truth, Moody decided to lay all the cards on the table. Let the Devil have his Due. "Because he didn't defeat Grindelwald. Tom Riddle did."

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Silence can be a dangerous thing. Sometimes it's the breaking point before a storm. Sometimes it's the herald of a mind going undone. Sometimes, it's just a pause, while the universe sighs.

"I..." Shaking his head, the old man at the head of the table sat heavily, looking at his hands. His eyes were wet, as tears streaked down from them to his beard, a veritable river. "I couldn't. I just couldn't."

"Albus..." crossing to the man's side, Minerva McGonagall wrapped an arm around the man's shoulders, the suddenly very frail, very old looking Headmaster shuddering where he sat.

Tonks and Harry shared horrified looks, Harry only still standing due to the wall behind him. What had they done? This was far and

beyond anything they'd thought to do. They wanted Dumbledore to admit his trespasses, and reforge a real bond with the Order. Wanted it to be based on honesty, from the future on. Wanted him to respect people, for being individuals and not chess pieces. This... this wasn't part of the plan.

"He... he was my..." choking a moment, the Headmaster laughed, but it was the sound of a heart breaking. "He was part of me, then. I swore to protect him. To do nothing to harm him, it was a vow we both made." A fresh well of tears etched at the man's face, and Harry felt shame greater than anything he had ever known, at this. Though the shock and uncertainty of Dumbledore's honesty was still rocking the room, it was Harry that felt responsible.

Minerva was making small hushing noises, as the man they'd all looked up to, relied on, believed in, crumpled. "We met, we were so young... he was so brilliant. Like the sun. The brilliance distracted me from what he was," Sniffing mightily, Albus laughed, a mirthless shaking of his body. "Before I had known it, I was bound by a vow to never act against him. But my hand, my influence could still try and right him.

"The most promising student in my care, was Tom. Oh he was brilliant, and powerful, so powerful. And so eager to prove it, after the hardships of his youth," eyes closing and mouth working silently, the man sobbed, and no one tried to press him. A minute passed, with the only sound in the room being Minerva's soothing voice, and Albus' labored breathing. "I had no idea, no idea of his own darkness. He took my Gellert and broke him... tore the knowledge from him. And then became something wholly worse."

Then it finally made sense. "You vowed the same thing to Tom, didn't you?"

Nodding, the broken man only curled in on himself more. "He made me, or he would not move to stop Gellert, but would simply kill him. To save his life, I had to swear never to act directly against Tom. I could only defend. Only protect, but never directly try to stop him.

"I ended up in the same place, again. I swore I'd not make those mistakes... that I would find a way to finally end this cycle of horror."

"Why me. Why did you force me to be in that place? What could it have..." blinking rapidly, Harry just shook his head. "Hardships of his youth. No..."

"Tom was an orphan. He grew up in a horrible place. Once he marked you, I let the prophecy play out-"

"Shut up." Shaking his head, Harry stumbled, but his legs wouldn't listen.

"-I left you to them, and it was the only thing I could do. He marked you as an equal, Harry." Dumbledore's eyes, peering over and rimmed in red, seemed to beg forgiveness. Harry had little in him. "I tried to make you an equal-"

"SHUT UP!" Roaring at the man, Harry clenched at his head after and groaned, as his magic begged for release. The hate, utter and blinding at knowing, knowing for certain now that his childhood could have been something other than a nightmare, but for this man's manipulations. "I don't need anymore truth. I've had enough," he croaked, backing from the room unsteadily.

His feet barely seemed attached, as he stumbled to the sitting room. Harry didn't even know if he made it to the chair, before his mind simply failed to deal with the strain. Blissful blackness swept over him, and he let it, welcomed it.

Tonks stood by the table, and tried, tried hard to feel pity, sympathy, anything other than disgust and hatred for the man at the head of the table. She didn't know what depths of feeling he could have drawn on to justify his actions. Obviously the man loved Grindelwald, and the bargains he'd made had told on him heavily. That he'd have to bargain away even more of his soul to Voldemort just to have the young wizard not kill him... Shaking her head, Tonks leaned on the table and stole someone's water. Taking a long drink, she tried to shake the feeling of disgust at what they'd done from her mind.

"This... this cannot leave this room," Kingsley murmured quietly.

Small bursts of argument kicked up, but Tonks knew well what the man meant. How would the wizarding world react, when it came to light that the one man Voldemort supposedly feared, didn't? That the same man was literally powerless to do more than defend himself from the Dark Lord? Britain would fall into chaos. "He's right."

Heads turned, and the room quieted, but did not go still at her soft words. "He's right," she said again, rising tiredly to her feet. "People can't know. We can't tell them. Everyone would lose hope, and we're on a crux, here. Voldemort's forces took a heavy loss, on two fronts. He's lost the power Malfoy had in his money, and the literal power of many of his Death Eaters. He will react, and violently."

"What do you mean," A woman Tonks didn't know well, asked.

"What she means," Snape said quietly, his eyes hooded, "is that the Dark Lord refuses to lose. He will escalate this war. Already he speaks to Fenrir about the packs, and how to spread them. If those wizards he confronts won't join his cause willingly, they'll be forced to join, within a month at the full moon," shaking his head, the man looked up and they all saw the strain this put on him. "He's begun speaking with heads of Vampire covens. Giants. There is even talk that he has begun to muster forces from overseas. Something I have no doubt in."

"He can't possibly think to take this war to the continent," Arthur barked, his face a mask of indignation. "What support could he gain there?"

"Durmstrang," Snape intoned quietly. "Even some of the Veela listen to him. Fudge's idiocy and the intolerance of the Ministry to those it calls dark creatures has alienated us from them. Many fled, while they could, and now speak for him of a new order, one with power on their side. On the continent, people still resent the ruin Grindelwald left the world they lived in, but fear for what little peace they have to be taken away again. Fear, you will find, can do much to motivate one."

Arthur still seemed unconvinced. "Still. What point would it make? We routed Grindelwald-"

"We?" Snorting, Snape gestured to the still incoherent Dumbledore. "Riddle, as he was known then, must have learned much from Grindelwald. He stirs the same loyalties, speaks the same speeches. He saw how the man worked, how his charisma motivated those who had little else, but fear and uncertainty. And please, Arthur, don't be so naïve as to think that the Ministry and Britain are the center of the world.

"He has allies abroad, already. This is a war, we're ill equipped to fight, and cannot lose." Going silent after his uncharacteristic tirade, Snape simply withdrew into his own corner, pensive. Those present knew why. Only Albus protected the man from Voldemort's mercies, and Snape had been lead to believe that the man could in fact do so. Now, it felt like he too was being played, but in a much more dangerous game. Voldemort knew that Albus couldn't protect him. Was he being used by the Dark Lord, more subtly than he imagined? How much of his efforts to spy on Voldemort had simply been planned losses? The thought made his blood go cold.

Pushing herself to standing, Tonks looked over the assembled with a worried eye. "I don't want this to leave room. We'll do what we must, but it has to end here. We're already at a disadvantage with things as they stand, and what we thought were winning battles now seem more like tactical losses to lull us into a false hope." Gathering her cloak about her, Tonks stilled her breathing, and made to leave the room.

As she crossed the door, Molly yelled after her, "Where are you going?"

"I have to speak to the Minister," she called back, hoping that the damage Fudge had done to the Ministry's reputation and connections on the continent wouldn't be irreparable.

Crossing into the main sitting room, she paused at the picture painted there. Harry lay, sprawled haphazardly on the couch, his head cradled in the lap of one Ginny Weasley. The girl's eyes were red and

she looked as if she'd been crying a long time, but worse, she looked drawn, tired and wasted. Always thin, Tonks was shocked at the hollowness that seemed to accentuate her, where before it was a spry sense of mischief. "Ginny..."

"I heard. The ears the twins make are getting better," the young woman replied, taking a shuddering breath. "Will you tell me?"

Tonks swallowed a rather harsh knot in her throat. "Tell you what, Ginny?"

"I've not felt... well." Smiling slightly, the young witch looked away, her eyes blank. "Not for a while. Not since this summer began."

"I think it would be good for you to visit St. Mungo's soon," Tonks replied, seeing the fear in the young woman. "I... think maybe we can go tonight, if you want."

Shaking her head, the youngest Weasley parted some of Harry's hair, idly, as she looked about the room. "What good would it do? Everything is a lie. What... what if I'm just a lie? How much of me is a lie? How much!" Her voice had risen, and by the end she was screaming at the ceiling and Tonks could hear people reacting in the other room.

"Ginny, I... I don't know," moving to the girl's side, Tonks made to lay a hand on Ginny's shoulder, but the thin girl moved savagely away. "Ginny..."

"I know something is wrong with me. It's all about Harry, isn't it? How... is it normal? He's all I can think about. Yet here he is, and there's... nothing."

Closing her eyes, Tonks did the only thing that came to mind. She'd no doubt that drawing her wand would make the young woman react, possibly endangering Harry, but there wasn't time for this. Summoning what reserves she had, she cast a wandless body-bind at Ginny, and groaned at the immediate flare of ache that lit behind her eyes.

Surprise and betrayal lit Ginny's eyes, as the young witch tried to undo the binding, only to slip closed as Tonks drew her wand and followed with a stunning curse. "Molly."

"I'm here." The subdued response told Tonks all she needed. It seemed that the Weasley matron was also concerned about not only her own child, but the one she considered her adopted one as well. "What should we do?"

Closing her eyes, Tonks slipped down to the chair opposite the two unconscious teens. "Ginny desperately needs a healer. I think she's been kept on Amortentia this summer... I found traces on Harry as well, but he's been out of reach."

"Amor... Oh Merlin."

"Molly, look at me. Look at me," Waving at the woman till she met Tonks' eyes, the metamorph felt bile rise in her throat. "You can't tell them."

Confusion lit on her face for just a moment, till a stubborn anger took it's place. "What can I do then? What can I tell them happened to my child!?"

Resting an arm over her eyes, Tonks shook her head. "I don't know, but it cannot, absolutely cannot involve Dumbledore. Do you understand?" When the woman made to bluster and retort, Tonks focused her glare solidly at the woman. "Do you want to open this entire country up to Voldemort? Then go ahead. Tell them that Dumbledore poisoned your child, to manipulate Harry. Tell them why he had to, because trust me, it'll take going that deep to get them from laughing and dismissing you! Tell them! So they can tell the world, that the one thing that people believe is keeping them safe, is a lie!"

Mortified, Molly simply shook her head and gathered the limp form of her daughter and fled from the room. When she wasn't in earshot, Tonks snarled and kicked the chair savagely, that she'd just risen from. "She's your child! Did you not see?!" Falling to the floor beside Harry, she simply stared at her own feet, unsure.

Tonight, she sadly thought, they'd lost a battle, and didn't even realize they were fighting.

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Harry woke to a splitting headache, and the none-too-gentle shaking of his recent flatmate. "Alright, alright! I'm awake."

"About time," Tonks snapped waspishly, before sighing. "Sorry. It's just..."

Laying his arm across her shoulders, Harry rose and pulled Tonks to him. "S'ok. I'm sorry to have dragged you into-"

Tonks stopped glaring, when he stopped talking, surprise at her shifting moods quieting him. "This war isn't about just you. Stop apologizing for every fucking thing. If you had died that night he came for you, we'd still be fighting, or dead, or maybe someone would have risen up and done what Dumbledore wouldn't," she snarled, shaking his arm from her shoulder. "This isn't your war. This isn't just you versus him. Other people suffer, other people die, other people fight. So stop it. Alright? Just... get over yourself." Rising angrily, Tonks paused by the doorway. "I'm sorry. I really am, and for what it's worth, I'm glad you want to protect me. But I became an Auror to fight, not be coddled and told 'good job' as my entire life's focus is made a mockery of by a prophecy. You can't win this war alone." As she stalked away from the stunned young man, she let the last of her words trail after her. "It would be nice if you realized that before you drive the rest of us away."

Staring at the place she'd been just a moment before, Harry blinked as the words she'd said sank in. Then hissed out a breath and stood himself. "What the hell?!" Stalking after the metamorph, Harry half ran up the stairs. "Hey, just wait a second!"

Catching up to her on the landing, he stopped, seeing how the last hours were telling on them. "Tonks."

"I'm sorry. I'm angry, and I don't know who to be angry at anymore. You're trying to be noble, and sometimes it's so... stupid and pig-headed it makes me want to just hit you." Leaning back on the door to one of the bedrooms, she banged her head into it slowly. "And it's infuriating because you're trying to protect us, after all the bullshit our world has given you."

Standing across from her, his anger drained out as fast as it had come. "Listen, you aren't the whole of Britain, alright? You helped me. When I didn't have anyone else," sighing, Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to sort his thoughts. "I just... it feels like everything is on me. That damn prophecy, Dumbledore... what else can I think? If I could end this, tonight, don't you think I'd jump at the chance? I want to be free of this madness."

Reaching out, Tonks laid a hand on his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"You were right though," Harry replied, closing his eyes. "I've been treating this, regardless of anyone else, as my war. I can't hold all the guilt and... I can't," voice going quiet, he realized though that what she'd accused him of, was precisely what he'd been doing. Ever since he'd learned the prophecy, he'd felt responsible for every death. Every casualty, and wrong that Voldemort had committed. Never mind he wasn't even out of school yet, never mind he wasn't trained to fight, and would only die or at best, briefly stall the madman in his path. He hoarded the blame.

He was tired, of being that Harry Potter. "I need... help."

"I know you do. We all do, sometimes. No one is an island, Harry." Smiling slightly, Tonks moved forward and wrapped him in a hug. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped. I just... when I came out, Ginny was there, then Molly... that woman."

"You two don't get along well."

Shaking her head, Tonks sighed. "No, not really."

Harry nodded against her shoulder. "How was Ginny?"

Pulling back, Tonks shook her head slowly. "Not good. Molly's taking her to St. Mungo's. The woman... that girl has been wasting away since June, and she just... sat by. I'm sure she had some stupid romanticized ideal that the girl was just sick with love, but this wasn't what she thought, I'm sure."

The way Tonks phrased it, made Harry wince. "So she's just been wasting away."

Punctuating each word very carefully, Tonks stared back at Harry. "It. Is. Not. Your. Fault."

"I know... I do. It just... takes a while to not just assume it is."

Letting her hand fall to Harry's, Tonks twined her fingers into his own. "C'mon. We need to call the Minister. Need to see what we can do about the continent and Voldemort's allies there."

Nodding, Harry moved with her back to the main floor, and the Floo there. "I take it that was Snape's serious matter that needed attention?" Tonks simply nodded, as Harry rubbed at his temple. "A spy you know... I worry about that. I'll need to talk to Narcissa. Draco. I'm not fond of him, but this," trailing off, Harry sighed. "Who knows. Hopefully she can pull him out of whatever madness Tom has planned."

The call to the Minister was short, as Rufus took in their faces. Without preamble, he invited the two to his offices. Begging a moment to settle their current affairs, Harry broke from the flames and headed to the kitchens, to let Lupin and Moody know what he was up to.

A somber room greeted him, as he strode in. McGonagall and Dumbledore were gone, but all others save Molly were there. Faces turned to him, and what worried him more than the lack of expression on some, was the lack of hope on them all. Tonight's revelations had broken the spirit of the Order. "Remus, I'm heading to the Ministry

with Tonks. We're going to speak with Scrimgeour about Snape's news. We need to let them know what to expect."

"Alright, Harry," nodding, the Werewolf closed his eyes again, and like most there sank back into a contemplative silence.

Uncomfortable with the silence, Harry made a quick retreat, meeting Tonks and speeding to the Ministry.

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Scourgifying the burnt egg from the pan, Harry tried to pull his focus back into the time at hand. Last night's long meeting at the Ministry with Rufus had left him weary and worn, where he'd already been exhausted. "Are we all packed?" Nodding to her question, Harry had to stifle a spike of irritation at the timing of everything. He'd just found his family's homes, just rediscovered his heritage. And now he was leaving it all behind.

"The trunks are packed I think. You can go recheck them, may be a good idea," he called behind him, focusing on getting the cooking finished so they could start the long journey ahead. "Oh, and I need to stop by Grimmauld one last time today. Last night... I never got a chance to speak to everyone."

Sticking her head out of the bedroom, Tonks made to catch his eye. Sharing a look, she nodded and flashed him a weak smile. "Alright. Just don't get down on yourself. You know why we're doing this."

"I know. It still feels like I'm abandoning them though."

Coming out of the room with the still-enlarged trunks, Tonks smiled gently at him, her eyes sad. "Harry, you can't constantly be doing what's best for everyone else, and still do what's best for you as well. At some point, they will conflict."

Laughing quietly, Harry set their plates, then scourgified the pans again, before banishing them to the trunks. "I feel very conflicted

today." Sitting down to the modest table, Harry listlessly ate, his mind elsewhere.

Tonks was in a similar state. "Harry, while you're at Grimmauld, I'm going to visit my family... let them know what's going on. Maybe see if Andy and Cissy will start talking again." It had been far too long, since she'd mailed or contacted them. She hoped, since her last post about needing to go into hiding, that they'd understand. Or in the least, forgive her.

"I do hope so. It'd be nice if something good came of all this."

Staring at Harry sadly, Tonks tried not to let those words hurt her.

Breakfast finished quieter than it had begun, and the two said short goodbyes as they Floo'd off to separate locations.

Coming out of the hearth into her family's home, Tonks settled at the dining room table and waited. She knew her mother would come down shortly, having heard and felt the Floo flare up. Nervousness got the better of the young metamorph, and she stood to begin some tea, knowing she'd need some soon anyway.

"Nym?" Peeking around the corner, her mother's face split into a smile as she saw her daughter fidgeting about. "Where have you been...?"

"Uhh, around?" And for the next few minutes, Tonks relaxed, as her mother wrapped her arms around her and just held her. "I'm OK, mum. Really."

Pulling back a bit, Andromeda Tonks looked her only child up and down slowly. "What have you been doing? You look thin."

"Mum, I look the same I always do," Tonks complained, rolling her eyes. "But... it has been rough. Harry and I haven't had much time to relax, since my last letter. But without the Aurors and the Order taking up all my time, I've had a chance to catch up on my self. Sleep and food and all. So no, I'm not too thin."

Sniffing, Andromeda swept her hair back off her shoulder and spared her daughter an arch glance. "You still look thin."

"Mum," Tonks just shook her head and sat at the table, as her mother went about finishing the tea. "I need to talk to you about some things."

"Serious, I would think, as you've been hiding for some time." Tonks sighed, realizing that no, her mother did not understand why she wasn't able to stay in touch. "So tell me, what it is that's brought you back to us."

Glancing back up, she took the tea that was offered and grinned sheepishly. "Well, it all started when I was set to guard Harry Potter..." An hour later, and many of the more embarrassing details glossed over, and Tonks had brought her mother up to speed on her summer. "Last night was the worst. Things just went way too far, and now with our plans-

"He feels like he's running away." Shaking her head, Andromeda took another sip of her cooling tea. "Your young man has quite the issue with guilt. You did always like the more melancholy ones."

Banging her head on the kitchen table, Tonks groaned and held up her hand, counting off points. "One, he's not my young man. Two, I've never dated anyone who was melancholy." She emphasized this point by making quote gestures as she said the word 'melancholy'. "And three, what makes you think I'm interested in Harry?"

Smirking, the former Black sister just eyed her daughter fondly. "So, who else is going with you, on this adventure?"

"Lupin will be going as well, I think he has-

"Remus? Nymphadora, you're not planning on stringing one of these young men along are you?"

Eyes going wide, Tonks' blush threatened to make her hair look bland. "Mother, how can you say that?"

Her turn to roll her eyes, Andromeda simply sighed and patted her only child's hand. "Don't be cruel to them, Nym. Not in these dark times especially."

"Why is it I always feel like we're having different conversations?"

Andromeda laughed, the sound pealed across the room. "Because you refuse to admit what you're actually saying."

Huffing, Tonks just crossed her arms and glared at her mother. "Can we be serious a moment?"

"Matters of the heart often are, but I will listen. What is it you want to say, Nym?"

Resisting the urge to let her forehead bang into the table again, Nymphadora just shook her head slowly. "I'm a little scared of being so far away. Of being something so... vital to this, now. Before it was different, being an Auror. That felt like I was doing the right thing, since I worked for the right people, you know? But it was empty. We didn't do anything to stop Voldemort. Then I found the Order, and it seemed to be just what I was looking for. I could fight him alongside other people like me... but again, it was the same thing. We watched, and waited, and while it seemed like we were more active than the Ministry, well. We did very little."

Stirring her tea slowly, Andromeda regarded her daughter intently. "I see. And the difference now?"

"Harry is more in the middle of this, than we were. I ever was," thinking of how to word things, Tonks sighed. "I suppose I'm just torn. I want to do my part, but it feels like I've gotten in over my head."

"Nymphadora." Wincing, the metamorph looked up to her mother and waited for what she was sure to come. "I'm proud of you, for what you've done to get a young man who was being treated unfairly, back on his feet. I'm proud of your own achievements, how you've worked hard and tried to get where you are, on your own merits." Pausing, the woman smiled wryly at her only daughter. "You have goals and

habits that make a mother worry themselves into gray hair. Just be careful with yourself. You're my only Nym. Don't make me lose her."

Biting her lip, Tonks nodded slowly. "I'm sorry. I'll be careful."

"Be good," Andromeda corrected. Smirking a bit, the woman across from her lifted her tea to take a sip. "And barring that, don't get caught."

"What?"

Grinning at her daughter over the rim of her cup, Andromeda lifted a brow. "The son and godson of the Marauders? With you and Remus along as guardians?" Snorting, the woman just reached out and patted her daughter's hand. "I pity those who have the misfortune to live near where you're going."

Banging her head into the table, Tonks just rested there, remembering why she dreaded these reunions. "Mum..."

Harry catapulted from the Floo into Grimmauld and windmilled his arms about, steadying himself. "Hello?" Calling to see who else was there, figuring that since Ginny was around there was a good chance the others would be too, Harry decided to check here first. Still cursing himself for the way things went the night before, the house felt hostile, an illusion he knew, but it mattered little. Too many illusions were shattered here, for it to ever feel comfortable again.

"Is that you, Harry?" Ron's voice seemed to come from upstairs, so he followed it. The first floor showed signs of being lived in, as he peeked into the open door where Hermione and Ginny once stayed. Trunks were at the foot of the beds, so he assumed the girls again were staying there. Seeing no one in the drawing room, he moved up a flight to the second floor and the room he and Ron had stayed in. The door was shut, but he could hear some motion, so he knocked and waited. A faint "come in" sounded, so he did so.

Peering around the doorway, he grinned, seeing his two friends sitting, if a bit flushed, on the edge of the bed. "Interrupting some studying?"

"Quiet you," Hermione chided, but laughed after. "Just spending some time, as we can. Things seem to be getting a bit odd, and none of the professors or anyone else was around today."

Nodding, and looking away, Harry closed the door again and leaned against it. "Yeah, I figure they have things to worry on." When Ron and Hermione looked at one another and back to him, he waved off their question before they could begin. "It's not my story to tell."

Shrugging, Ron moved aside somewhat and pulled a few things off a chair, giving Harry somewhere to sit. "Take a load off, been a while since we've seen you. Not going to disappear again so soon are you?"

"Actually that's what I'm here to talk about," glancing at Hermione, he saw mixed relief and anxiety on her face. Harry knew why, of course. He'd discussed the plan Moody had made with her, while at the Ministry. Though he knew she could be trusted, he didn't want to leave such a massive secret on her head too long. "I'm not going to be going to Hogwarts this fall."

"What!?" Ron bolted upright, and looked at Harry as if he'd grown another head. "What do you mean? You're the Gryffindor seeker! Who's going to be leading the DA, for that matter? You can't just not go back, mate."

Laughing sadly, Harry motioned Ron back down. "I can't, Ron. Really I can't," sighing, Harry looked around the room and was surprised to see that what he'd taken to be someone else's things to actually be Hermione's. When he looked back from the trunk to the girl, she looked away with a blush. "Ah. Well, let me explain."

"This summer I had to get away from Privet. Call me paranoid, but I wasn't sure the wards would keep anything more than a mouse out."

Hermione's brow knit at this. "But Harry, why would Dumbledore send you back then? I'm sure he had good reason."

Wincing at the man's name, Harry nodded slowly. "I know. I think they would work on just about any normal wizard, but Voldemort was rebirthed with my blood as part of the ceremony. Remember Quirell? He was trying to defeat that. The problem is, once he'd used my blood as part of the ritual-"

Eyes going wide, Hermione raised a hand to her mouth masking her gasp. "Oh. Oh no, they'd be useless."

"Right," Harry continued. "Also, wards are... well wizards are silly sometimes. Wards are usually not set to keep out things other than wizards. Which is how Dobby found me that one year. I figure if I were at home, then when I was attacked by Dementors..."

Ron shook his head, face having gone pale, "Oh man."

Chuckling, Harry leaned back in the chair and ran a hand through his hair, trying to settle it out of his eyes. "Pretty much. Maybe they'd hold, maybe not. I don't know, so I couldn't trust them anymore. I was going to just leave on my own, but Tonks showed up, and... well we ended up moving around a bit, evading the Order, the Ministry, and Voldemort for a while. Till the will reading, where I'm sure Hermione and you have heard what happened."

Hermione's eyes had narrowed when his vague description of the time after Privet had been recounted, but didn't say anything immediately. Ron on the other hand, grinned and reached out to shake his knee, "Mum was in a state after that! That part with the knife... wow. How did you know it wouldn't... well you know. Kill you?"

Harry smirked slightly. "I didn't."

Blinking, Ron sat back and seemed to consider this. "Wow."

"How did that work, Harry?"

He'd expected Hermione to ask, so had prepared what he hoped was a good enough explanation. "Sirius had made arrangements, for what I can only imagine is a kind of blood-adoption ceremony. It's a way to anchor a bloodline so it won't end. I figure it used to be used more, to

ensure pureblood lines stayed that way." Shrugging at their confused looks, Harry went on, "it made me literally part of the Black family. So when the knife thing was presented, I figured the only way to keep the will reading going as it was, was to accept the challenge."

"So you stabbed an enchanted dagger into your chest." Hermione's droll tone told him volumes about what she thought of such an action. "Honestly."

"It worked out alright."

"You are an idiot," she huffed, with a glare. "And lucky."

Rubbing the back of his head, Harry grimaced. "So I've been told. Well, after all that, there was some confusion with Tonks. Seems she'd been implicated in kidnapping me, rather than what really happened. That was a mess..." deciding for the moment to just gloss that night over, Harry sped on to the next topic, even though it was likely going to be harder to explain than why they'd let Lupin loose on London during his change.

"Things have gotten too dangerous. I can't risk going back to Hogwarts, with the war so close, and me being one of Tom's main targets. It's be like painting a target on the school." Which was true, he had to admit. But more than that, he worried on his safety, under Dumbledore and how well he could concentrate on training, classes, and Voldemort while also possibly dodging the Order. He also didn't think that he'd be able to focus on the kind of training he intended to, with so many loyal to Dumbledore's ideals around. Never mind that the man seemed to have broken last night... Harry didn't know what the result of all that would be, but too much had gone on to turn back now.

It didn't hurt that being somewhere else would keep him from feeling that ache of guilt every time he looked at McGonagall or Dumbledore.

"But Harry, surely you don't think they'd attack a school? I mean even the Death Eaters have kids there."

Nodding, Harry sighed, wishing again that he'd had the sense to listen, and not react like Hermione had cautioned. "And kids put those Death Eaters in prison. And later, they ended up being Veiled. So, what do you think they'll do, Ron?"

Swallowing nervously, Ron nodded. "I see what you mean."

"Harry," Hermione's voice was low, worried as she looked between the two. "What about the DA though? The Death Eaters know it was us. What's going to happen, if they come for us somehow?"

Closing his eyes, Harry loosed an unsteady breath. "Close the DA."

"What?" Both Hermione and Ron were on their feet now, looking at Harry as if he'd gone mad. "You can't be serious," Hermione continued hotly. "I mean, they need to learn. We need to learn, and for the most part, the only real defense teachers we've had were you, the fake Moody, and Lupin. And even then, you've improved on their material!"

"Listen," the two continued to point of things, while Harry shook his head till he raised his voice over them, "Listen! I didn't say stop. I said close the DA. Make it official and let it go. I have something else in the works, but it's up to the Minister to green light it." Sighing, Harry sat back down as his friends quieted. "Don't make yourselves larger targets. Make it official that the DA is closing, and that there will be no more meetings. Hell make it look like you're afraid of exactly what you are."

Shaking her head slowly, Hermione looked to Ron sadly. "What can we do then?"

"Like I said, there's another option I'm working on. One more official, more useful and better organized. So just wait a bit." Sighing, Harry pulled his glasses off and rubbed at his temple. "I'm not happy about this. But the new program would be a lot better than what I could teach, and more secure. Just trust me here. The kids in Hogwarts with Death Eater parents will embellish things enough to make it seem like you're shaking in your boots. That'll stall anything long enough."

Cocking her head to the side, Hermione regarded him carefully, "You seem to have had a lot of contact with the new Minister."

"Yeah, you could say he owes me a favor," Harry replied, chuckling. "Anyway. So, did you guys have any other questions?"

Ron seemed to consider that a moment and Harry knew this wasn't going to be pleasant. "What's up with you and Ginny?"

Harry stood and moved to one of the windows, looking down at the street, empty and full of litter and odd debris. "That... Between me and her." Looking back to his long-time friend, all he could do was shake his head. "I haven't spoken to her since before this all started. I'm not sure there is a me and her, Ron. We're just friends."

Snorting, Ron waved that off, "Friends don't get like that, Harry. She's been lost, this summer. Couldn't you have mailed? Or visited? If it weren't for Mum making me promise, I was planning on have a word about this."

"Let it go, Ron," Harry's voice, though quiet, had an edge to it. As much as he wanted to just tell Ron what happened, Tonks had reminded him how little could actually be said about last night's events. He felt sick, knowing for all Ron knew, he was just abandoning Ginny, leading her on or worse. That Molly had spoken to him first couldn't have helped. Knowing soon it would be out that Ginny was in St. Mungo's would be even harder to reconcile. "Things got strange Ron. I don't know how to explain it, but we aren't what we were. I think it best for Molly to explain this one."

"Why can't you, Harry?" Ron had stood, and Harry was too preoccupied to have noted it. Now, the other young man was just a few feet away and visibly restraining what Harry could only figure was his protective instincts. "What's gone on, that you won't tell me?"

"Not won't, Ron. Can't."

Screwing his face up in irritation, Ron stomped away and slammed the door behind him. "That could have gone better...."

Hermione just nodded but looked to where Ron had gone. "I... Harry?" Having knelt down beside her, Harry wrapped his arms around the young witch and hugged her. "Harry?"

"Make sure he's OK. I won't be around for a while to help." Fighting the weakness in his own voice, Harry took a steadying breath. "Just... be yourselves. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I always am."

Sniffling, Hermione easily saw where this was going and nodded, "That's a lie and you know it," she accused, blinking back her tears. Wrapping her arms around him, she sighed and thumped him once on the back. "Take care of yourself."

"I'll do my best. I have a stack of letters... Hedwig is still with Luna. Can you get them off? Most are to the DA, so..."

Nodding, Hermione tried to smile but her facade broke. "I'll get them out. I should see to Ron."

"Yeah," turning so he didn't have to see her, or worry on Hermione seeing his state, Harry looked back out the window. "Take care of each other."

"You too," she added with a sniffle, and the door closed quietly behind her.

Harry Floo'd back to the flat to see a morose Tonks sitting by the table, sipping hot cocoa. Blinking, he crossed and sat beside the former Auror and just let the quiet stretch out between them. Eventually, she offered him the cup, with a half-hearted smile. "Helps when I'm down. Used to drink this after the odd fill-in shift at Azkaban."

"I can see where it would help there," he replied, sighing and taking a sip. It helped, but he couldn't decide whether it was the cocoa or Tonks, in truth. "How did things with your family go?"

Wrinkling her nose, Tonks sat her feet up on the table lightly. "Mum is alright. Dad wasn't home, but she'll talk with him. He won't like it, but

he'll understand." Leaning back, she regarded her feet intently for a moment. "You?"

"I think Ron is really mad about Ginny. Can't say I blame him. They're worried about the DA, and how they'd be able to learn proper defense."

Nodding, Tonks' lips curled up slightly. "I see why you opened up that can of worms with the Minister, then."

Harry chuckled but didn't smile. "Yeah. I don't want them left without options. Hopefully he can get enough support with the proxies I set up, and Narcissa's to go ahead with it. I'll still be running it, considering the funds are coming out of my vault, but we'll see how well it works."

"I can't see how an Auror supervised youth defense training center would be a bad thing, Harry. How'd you come up with that, anyway?"

"I didn't," he replied with a slight laugh. "I stole the idea from all the karate clubs, and the YMCA."

Blinking at him, Tonks suddenly burst into laughter. "I see. You think Hogsmeade will be alright to house it?"

Nodding, Harry took another sip of the cocoa. "I think so. It'll only help with the economy, with people out on the grounds more. The hard part is getting Hogwarts to make that step to allow people to go after classes, but the Minister said he'd find a way. "

"Then I suggest, Mr. Potter that you relax and not worry about your DA then."

"It's Lord Potter, thank you."

Rolling her eyes, Tonks transfigured the rest of Harry's cocoa into ice water then vanished the cup. "Prat."

"So we're still going then. You didn't tell them where?" Tonks shook her head, and raised her brow. "No, I didn't tell Ron or Hermione either. So it's just you, me, Lupin, Moody and Scrimgeour that know."

Tonks cast a drying charm on Harry, as he brushed at the water pointlessly, forgetting he could do the same. "I guess it's all done but the doing then, isn't it?"

Nodding, Harry felt the edge of excitement creeping up, and pushed it back down. Time enough for that later. "We should get going. The plane leaves in a few hours, and we still need to meet up with Lupin, and get our appearances right."

Summoning the trunks they'd packed and stowing them in her new purse, more a concession to needing a place to put them nearby than any desire on her part, Tonks looked over the flat once more and grinned. "I think the Twins will like it here."

"I think so. It's a nice flat." Thinking of their brief, but pleasant time there, Harry recalled a similar property, near King's Cross. "Maybe when we get back, we can see if the one we checked out the other day, from the properties I inherited is as comfortable."

Snickering, Tonks nudged his shoulder. "Assuming I'd want to live with a git like you."

"Someone has to teach you how to not burn water," he replied, fighting the rise of color at his cheek. It didn't help, when Tonks just grinned back at him, over her shoulder.

TO BE CONTINUED in "Fall of Innocence", before "Edge of Winter"

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AN: Not much left once I got back to things, but I realized quickly I was nearing the end of the Britain arc of the story. Why so much going on? Two reasons. Fall will be split between a few things going on in Harry's Britain, with McGonagall acting as Headmistress, while

Dumbledore recovers, and I wanted to set that up. With her as the lead of Hogwarts, I can enact more... lets say sensible measures. My 'magical YMCA' for one. Additionally, I don't feel like penning up the reasons behind Dumbledore and his methods anymore. Got sick of feeling like I was making him out to be more of a jerk than he was, and frankly, under the context I placed him... I treated him mildly. Yes that entire situation is far from resolved. It's not, though, Harry's to resolve, now is it? We'll see more on it. In time.

Where's Harry going? Well, since people like throwing the word cliché at me as if it had an edge, lets go with that. Salem work for you? Cool. Expect a bit of fun there. Did I mention this was AU? Good. I think it's in the summary, and prologue chapter. Any complaints about that will simply be ignored. Don't waste your, or my time.

The Girl In Gray will be back. Don't worry. An no, I've not told anyone who she is. You're not left out.

Now on to things that need addressing!

Dobby & Winky: House elves... other than the obvious use of them, that being for the care and upkeep of things in the wizarding world, are not going to be a major point here. They are far too easily made into Deus Machina, or plot hole fillers. I like Harry being kind to them. I don't like him having a servile demigod, were he to think of what an house elf capable of.

Bloodlaw: Narcissa calls it simply Law, while Harry and Tonks have come to think of it as bloodlaw, as they keep running into instances of how it runs in families, and follows bloodlines. As they don't have any real reference to it outside of Narcissa, they could be calling it Snorlak Rule.

Dumbledore... what?: I ran with the vagueness in the books. One logical reason for why he ended up the way he was, and never acted against Tom.

CHP15